



**• SPRING BOOKS •**

**Thomas Powers: Our Superhero**

# **The New York Review** **of Books®**

April 2, 2015 / Volume LXII, Number 6

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Shakespeare in Tehran**

**Sue Halpern:  
The **ROBOTS**  
Are Here!**



**HOT MONEY  
NEW YORK**

**BY MARTIN FILLER**



**Ian Bostridge: My Schubert**

**Mark Lilla on  
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**Christopher Jencks:  
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# SPRING BOOKS



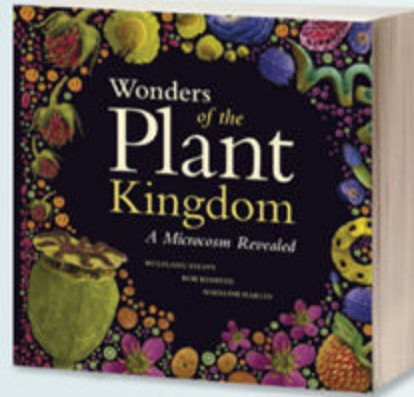
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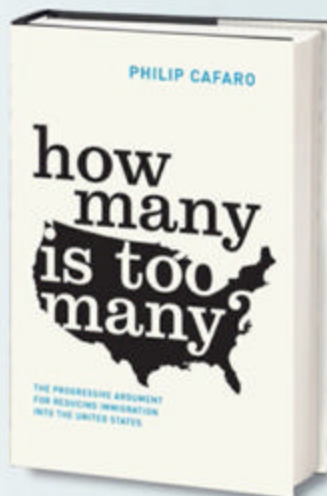
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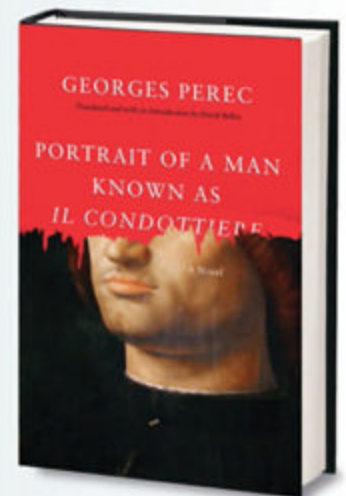
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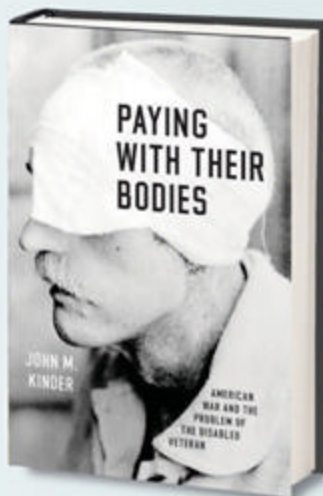
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John M. Kinder

"For the wounded soldier, the shadow of war extends long after the shooting stops. By placing the disabled soldier at the center of the history of American warfare since the Civil War, John Kinder has provided a disturbing and important account of this country's engagement with war."—Jay Winter, Yale University

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"In *Ozone Journal*, Balakian masterfully does the things nobody else does—derange history into poetry, make poetry painting, make painting culture, make culture living—and with a historical depth that finds the right experience in language."—Bruce Smith, author of *Devotions*

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Nate Klug

"I can't get Nate Klug's spare, clear poems out of my head, and thank God for that. I would say that he is at the beginning of a great career, but that sells this book short, which seems to me to already have elements of greatness."—Christian Wiman, author of *Once in the West*

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# FROM CHICAGO



## Doris Salcedo

Edited by  
Julie Rodrigues Widholm  
and Madeleine Grynstejn

*With Contributions by Elizabeth Adan,  
Katherine Brinson, Helen Molesworth,  
and Doris Salcedo*

Published to accompany Salcedo's first retrospective exhibition and the American debut of her major work *Plegaria muda*, *Doris Salcedo* is the most comprehensive survey of her sculptures and installations to date. This volume includes critical essays and a reflection from Salcedo herself.

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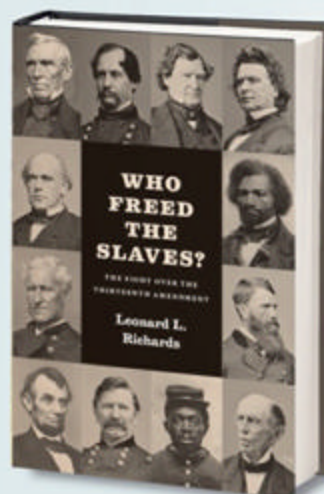


### Trees

Noel Kingsbury

From the fortitude of the ancient ginkgo tree to artistic depictions of quince fruit in the ruins of Pompeii, Kingsbury explores the culinary, medicinal, cultural, and practical uses of a forest of tree species.

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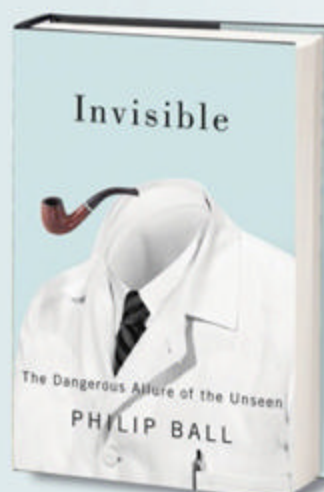
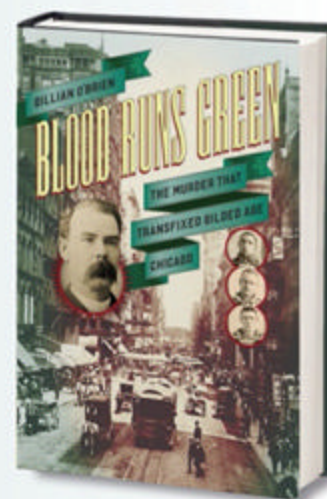
## Blood Runs Green

The Murder That Transfixed Gilded Age Chicago

Gillian O'Brien

"Who was Dr. Patrick Cronin and who murdered him? To find out you must dive into O'Brien's dark, fascinating tale of 1880s Chicago. This true-life whodunit captures the Second City at a key moment in its history as it weaves through sensation-seeking journalists, wild-eyed Irish nationalists and, of course, corrupt police officers. An enlightening and entertaining read."—Douglas Perry, author of *The Girls of Murder City*

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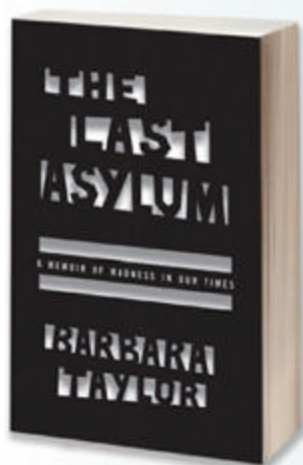
## Invisible

The Dangerous Allure of the Unseen

Philip Ball

"The history of invisibility provides a rich seam of stories and analysis for Ball, one of the most engaging contemporary science writers. He covers the magic, superstition, and science of making people and objects invisible, from ancient spells and potions to the latest 'metamaterials' coming out of physics labs."—*Financial Times*

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Barbara Taylor

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The Use and Abuse of American Environmental Images

Finis Dunaway

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—MARK MAZOWER, *Financial Times* (UK)

“A compelling and brilliant book.”  
—*Sunday Telegraph* (UK)

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5



# The American Hero

## American Sniper

a film directed by Clint Eastwood

## American Sniper:

### The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in US Military History

by Chris Kyle with Jim DeFelice and Scott McEwen.

William Morrow, 379 pp., \$15.99 (paper)

## Thomas Powers

If the guys are tired of talking football at a bar near a military post where enlisted men from elite military units do their drinking on a Saturday night, you might get an argument going with a different sort of question, like what, exactly, was the greatest single rifle shot ever made by an American marksman in combat? The celebrated American sniper Chris Kyle was not history-minded but he was born and died in Texas and I imagine that Texas pride and his own modesty might have prompted him to say: Why, there's no room for doubt about that—it was Billy Dixon at Adobe Walls on the Canadian River in Texas in 1874 when he shot a Comanche warrior off his horse at a distance of just under a mile using a fifty-caliber Sharps buffalo rifle firing a bullet one-half inch in diameter from a brass cartridge loaded with 110 grains of powder.

A flat claim of that sort invites exception. Dixon's was a remarkable shot for drama, perhaps, and it certainly brought the Adobe Walls fight to an end as abruptly as Hiroshima ended the war with Japan, if practical result is all you are interested in. But distance is the challenge for a sniper. The greatest shot must be the longest shot that still did the job. Some US Army surveyors with General Nelson Miles showed up at Adobe Walls after the fight and measured the distance from Dixon's rest—the spot where he steadied the gun while he aimed and squeezed the trigger—to the bluff off in the distance where a group of Comanches on horseback were silhouetted against the sky while deciding whether to go on with the fight. The surveyors came up with a distance of 1,538 yards, about nine-tenths of a mile. Very nice shot.

But the friends of Chris Kyle and around a million other Americans who have read or at least bought Kyle's book, *American Sniper*, would all know, and somebody in the circle at the bar would be bound to say, that the longest shot, making it the greatest shot, was not Dixon's. The longest would have to be the shot that Kyle fired one day through the window of a second-story room of a house in a small village just outside Baghdad in 2007. He was on the last of his four tours in Iraq. During the ten weeks he spent in the area Kyle had about twenty confirmed kills but the one he remembered was the long one. He refers to his equipment as the .338 Lapua and includes a photograph of it in his book. He doesn't name the weapon but it looks a good deal like the .338 McMillan TAC sniper rifle. It's not as fancy as you might think but the scope and the cheek rest were state of the art. The designator “.338 Lapua” doesn't refer to

the gun but to the cartridge, developed in the 1980s specifically for long-range sniping.

Kyle was doing overwatch while army units were operating in the area. That meant his job was to keep track of everything within eyesight, looking for bad guys. Through the scope on his rifle he could see out a mile or more, across open country to the next village beyond. The rules of engagement (ROEs) said that nobody was a target who was not armed and more or less immediately threatening.



Former Navy SEAL and expert sniper Chris Kyle, Dallas, Texas, April 2012

But by this time Kyle had developed a deep instinctive sense for the behavior of Iraqi men in a war zone. If he saw an Iraqi male of military age poking about a rooftop with no apparent purpose, he grew suspicious. If the fellow appeared to be looking around—in effect trying to spot him—he grew warier still. Was he fooling with something Kyle couldn't quite see?

Kyle had watched hundreds and hundreds of Iraqi males of military age lurking in doorways, prowling rooftops, moving stuff around, appearing and disappearing, peeking around corners. He didn't like peekers. But the ROEs said he had to wait for certain signs and behaviors before he was allowed to pull the trigger. This is the only official navy or SEAL regulation of a great many cited that Kyle in his book does not immediately crack some sort of joke about ignoring. Of the many hundreds of Iraqis observed by Kyle through his scope he concluded that about 160 met the ROEs, at which point he shot and

killed them. Officials queried a few but it never went further than that.

On this particular day in the village near Baghdad Kyle noted a man on a rooftop in the next village more than a mile away. Kyle didn't like the look of him. Then a US Army convoy emerged on a road, moving into range of the man on the rooftop. The man reappeared, raising a bulky something that Kyle spotted as a launcher for rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs). The ROEs had been met. The distance was 2,100 yards, a full thousand feet further than a mile. Kyle's scope was not calibrated for that sort of distance but he thought he could eyeball it. The squeeze was

did the day he was flying home when his buddies were going back to war, he said, “That sucked.” Of the brothers who served beside him in Ramadi, men he would have died for, he said, “There were absolutely no turds in that platoon—it was a real outstanding group.” It seems nothing can drag a strong feeling out of Kyle in the form of words.

Doubt on this point was laid to rest on the day two of his closest friends were mortally wounded in Ramadi several hours apart, both right in front of him. His friend Ryan was shot across his face, permanently blinded, and later died during reconstructive surgery. His friend Marc, just ahead of him going up a set of stairs, glanced out a window, and was about to shout a warning when a bullet entered through his open mouth and exited from the back of his head.

“Having lost two guys in the space of a few hours,” Kyle writes,

our officers...decided it was time for us to take a break. We went back to Shark Base and stood down. (Standing down [Kyle adds here] means you're out of action and unavailable for combat. In some ways, it's like an official timeout to assess or reassess what you're doing.)

There can be little doubt that Kyle took this hard, but appropriate words were very slow to come.

*American Sniper* was written after Kyle, under pressure from his wife Taya, left the military. The book was put together with the help of two coauthors, Jim DeFelice and Scott McEwen, who have imposed clarity and order on what might have been a rote account of 160 incidents of war. Kyle emerges as an uncomplicated fellow who wanted to be a soldier, and then wanted to be a Navy SEAL, and after that wanted to be trained as a sniper, and finally wanted to go on as many missions as possible and kill bad guys to serve his country and protect his friends.

He was a good shot but never the best shot. His remarkable record of confirmed kills seems to have been in large part the result of sticking to it through four tours. Kyle wanted to be right in the thick of it. What the war was about, and why Americans in armored vehicles were racing through the streets killing Iraqi males of military age who met the ROEs, are questions that do not interest him. “Everyone I shot was evil,” he writes at the end of his book. “I had good cause on every shot. They all deserved to die.”

Kyle's book surprised everybody when it became a dramatic commercial success—over five hundred thousand copies in hardcover, and more than a million so far in paperback. Kyle's murder in Texas in February 2013 by a veteran he was trying to help did not halt the efforts of Clint Eastwood and Warner Brothers to make a film of the book, which has also been a huge success that surprised everybody—over \$300 million in ticket sales as of mid-February. Fierce cudgel fights have been waged in the blogosphere about what the film actually *means* but conventional reviews have been generally good and the film received six nominations for Academy Awards, including best

Sebastien Micke/Contour by Getty Images





**MARTHA HODES, *Mourning Lincoln*** “A stunning piece of research, based on an extraordinary range of materials often overlooked by traditional historians.”—Michael Burlingame, *The Wall Street Journal* ■ “[A] lyrical and important new study.”—Jill Lepore, cover review, *The New York Times Book Review*

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picture and best actor. In the event it won for best sound editing.

What strikes me as really remarkable about the book and the film, considered together, is not so much the unreflective and hyperactive man at the book's center, but the fact that it was turned by Clint Eastwood and his writer Jason Hall into a film of such disciplined art and moral complexity. Part of the magic is the acting of Bradley Cooper when delivering the half-dozen lines, lifted more or less intact from the book, that capture the serene confidence of Kyle at the beginning of his career, and the strain bringing him close to collapse at the end. In the film Kyle is prompted, a little more clearly than he was in life, to join the military by the terrorist attacks on US embassies in East Africa. Cooper tells a navy recruiter that the SEALs might not be right for him—he's not too keen on water. The recruiter needles him: he understands; 90 percent of the men who sign up can't take it and quit.

"I'm not one of those men, Sir," says Cooper. "I don't quit."

The simplicity of these lines gives them strength but Cooper without effort pushes them further, conveying absolute conviction. I'd have signed up Cooper on the spot, just as the recruiter did.

In a scene close to the end of the film, Cooper/Kyle is pressed by a psychiatrist to explain certain out-of-control behavior after his final return from Iraq. "Have you ever seen things," the psychiatrist asks, "or done things you wish you hadn't?"

"Oh, that's not me, no. No, Sir, I'm not worried about that. I am willing to meet my Creator and answer for every shot I took."

These lines are also simple and direct, but Cooper's voice is weak, close to breaking, and the look on his face betrays bleak fear and doubt. With these two scenes and a few others the arc of the film is established, from the gung-ho enthusiasm of young men eager to go forth and kick ass for the greatest country in the world, to the half-strangled confusion of men who have suffered and killed for reasons that slip away like water in sand.

This may not be your view of how young men back from Iraq ought to feel, and you may think that saying so somehow distorts and diminishes everything Chris Kyle believed and did, but I would argue that you can't interpret in any other way what Clint Eastwood's film of *American Sniper* actually says. There is no easy Op-Ed summary of the film's point; it's certainly not pro-war but it's not antiwar either. What it summons up is a rich sense of the empty magnitude of a long war that achieved nothing.

Sniping is at the heart of the story Eastwood tells. It opens with the classic nightmare sniper's dilemma—whether to shoot a ten- or twelve-year-old boy who has just been handed a Russian grenade by his mother. American troops are approaching the pair. The scene is the city of Fallujah, west of Baghdad, far enough along in the war for the place to be a

desolate wreck. A second SEAL is beside Cooper on the roof. Cooper is wearing a headset and tells somebody what he sees and asks, "Can you confirm?"

"Negative," is the answer. "Your call."

Cooper doesn't look happy but he doesn't hesitate, either.

This scene is interrupted with a flashback to the deer he shot with his Dad, the one thing after another that led to the military, marriage to the smart-talking girl Taya whom he met in a bar, everything changing in a minute on September 11, and back to Fallujah where Cooper has placed the scope's crosshairs on the boy, who has broken into a gentle run toward the American soldiers. Finger on trigger. Sniper SOP is to exert just enough pressure to complete the trigger pull between the shooter's heartbeats. But in truth this isn't a hard shot. The kid is right there.



Bradley Cooper as Chris Kyle in Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper*

Cooper kills him. In the next instant he kills the mother, who has rushed forward to pick up the grenade.

The second SEAL says, "That was gnarly."

Later Cooper gets a little ragging for being a softie. "Get the fuck off me!" he shouts—then explains, "It's not how I envisioned my first one to go down." So he's not a heartless bastard who laughs at killing, but at the same time he is cut out for the work.

Kyle's war was mostly sniping; that's how he rang up his high score and was nicknamed "the Legend" by fellow soldiers who felt safer when Kyle was on overwatch. But Kyle on one tour also joined the troops on the ground to break into houses while searching for a local killer called "the Butcher" who might help lead them to Abu Musab al-Zarkawi, leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq and the ultimate bad guy the military really wants. These scenes are filled with horror and confusion—the brutal torture of a boy by the Butcher using a power drill, the killing of the boy's father, an assault on a building where the Butcher has established a kind of abattoir for cutting up his enemies.

Iraqis portrayed in the film are mostly bearded men trying to kill Americans, or terrified women and children being yelled at in English by Americans all shouting at once. "This is a war zone, Sir," Cooper yells at an Iraqi who has ignored a command to leave the city. The film makes three things clear: Iraq is being devastated by the war, the main American achievement is to get Sunnis and Shiites killing each other, and the basic American strategy is to kill all the Iraqis who are trying to kill them.

This chaos raises an interesting question. It creeps in as we watch Cooper setting up his rooftop perches, scanning the cityscape for peekers. Sometimes the guy in the scope is just a guy on a moped, but sometimes the guy in the scope drops to his knees and starts to scabble in the dirt of the road to bury an artillery shell. When the ROEs are met Cooper settles himself into his rifle. He prepares to shoot with both eyes open, not the usual practice. He likes to see what's going on around the target. We watch the pad of his trigger finger approach the trigger. The pad is gently depressed as it touches metal. At this point the target has about a second to live. Cooper's kills are all clean. There are no wounded men requiring another shot to muddy the shooter's satisfaction.

But Cooper is not unchanged by the progress of his war. In a late episode

away. A sandstorm is rolling into the city of Baghdad.

But Cooper has a bead on the Iraqi sniper, squeezes the trigger, and kills him. Something like this happened in fact, but not in the manner of the mad compression of events in this final scene of Cooper's war in *American Sniper*. After Cooper kills the Iraqi sniper, bad guys in the street converge on the building where the Americans are trapped. A missile-firing helicopter, called in on themselves by Cooper's group, destroys half the building. The sandstorm closes in. Iraqis and Americans are firing every which way in the swirling twilight of the storm. The surviving Americans scramble aboard armored vehicles to make their escape. I do not see how this final scene of blind confusion can possibly be interpreted as a statement of Eastwood's support

for the wisdom or necessity of the war. In a kind of epilogue he delivers a similar measured judgment about snipers.

Back home Cooper takes his son deer-hunting in Texas, just as his father had taken him. They are striding through tall grass on a bright fall day. "You know," Cooper says to the boy, "it's a heck of a thing to stop a beating heart."

That struck a chord of memory, and what I remembered was Eastwood's 1992 film, *Unforgiven*. Eastwood, playing the part of Will Munny,

he scopes another child picking up a grenade launcher. This one is maybe seven or eight. "Don't pick it up," Cooper says once, then again. He might even be praying, but to whom? He is conflicted—we've just been shown that he now has a boy of his own—and his relief is palpable when the kid drops the launcher and runs away. This is the one clear step we witness in Cooper's moral education.

Sometimes Cooper kills two or three people in a day. Kyle makes no attempt to give each his due in his book, nor does Eastwood in his film. But he records the care with which Cooper builds his record of deliberate kills. What is the greater good being served here? If what we see is what was really happening—a relentless American mission tempo to kill Iraqi males of military age who meet the ROEs until officials in Washington tell them to stop—then what, in truth, could a man like Chris Kyle tell his Creator when the time came? That he hadn't been told to stop?

Cooper's last shot is Kyle's long shot, with most of the circumstances changed. He is on a rooftop scanning the city for an Iraqi sniper who has been killing American soldiers trying to build a concrete wall between two Baghdad neighborhoods to hinder the Sunni-Shiite sectarian killing. A soldier is shot off a ladder and Cooper spots the Iraqi sniper on a rooftop 2,100 yards out. But the men with Cooper on the rooftop don't want him to take this shot. The streets are filling with bad guys. The Americans on the rooftop are hopelessly outnumbered and it's getting worse by the minute. Help from a quick reaction force is thirty minutes

and two colleagues are hired to kill two men who have cruelly mutilated a prostitute. They have behaved atrociously and certainly deserve something. One of the hunted men breaks a leg when his horse is shot from under him. He starts to drag himself slowly toward safety. Eastwood's partner can't bring himself deliberately to kill a wounded man so Eastwood takes the gun and shoots him. He is hit in the stomach and is soon crying pitifully for water. "Give him a drink," Eastwood shouts. "We ain't gonna shoot."

Like his character Will Munny, Eastwood as a director shrinks back from a deliberate kill, an act stripped of the danger and threat that justify violence in the heat of battle. That is the thing Eastwood finds it unsettling to contemplate—the moral emptiness of the deliberate kill. The second hunted man is killed by Eastwood's other partner, a nearsighted kid, who surprises the victim sitting in an outdoor privy and shoots him pointblank as he struggles to rise. The kid is badly shaken, close to tears. "It's a helluva thing," Eastwood says, "killing a man, taking away all he's got, and all he's ever going to have."

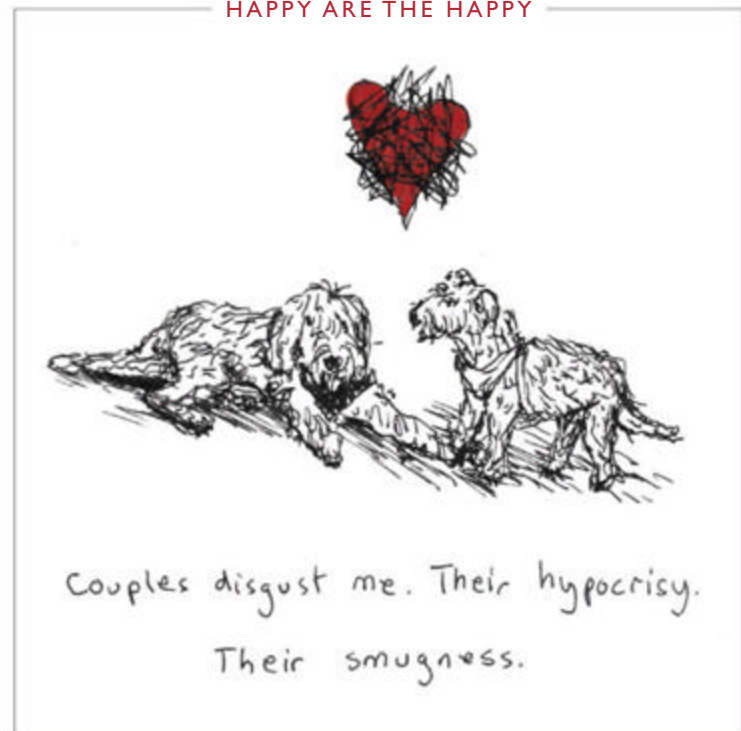
With this line we are given a simple formula for measuring Cooper/Kyle's contribution to America's war in Iraq. It's a fair guess that the sniper's victims were for the most part killed young. On average they might have lived another thirty years or more. The math says the sniper, all by himself, one shot at a time, managed to erase about five thousand years of human life. How far down that line of thought Chris Kyle went I cannot say, but Eastwood, and Cooper under his direction, have looked it in the eye. In their judgment the deliberate kill is a heck of a thing. □



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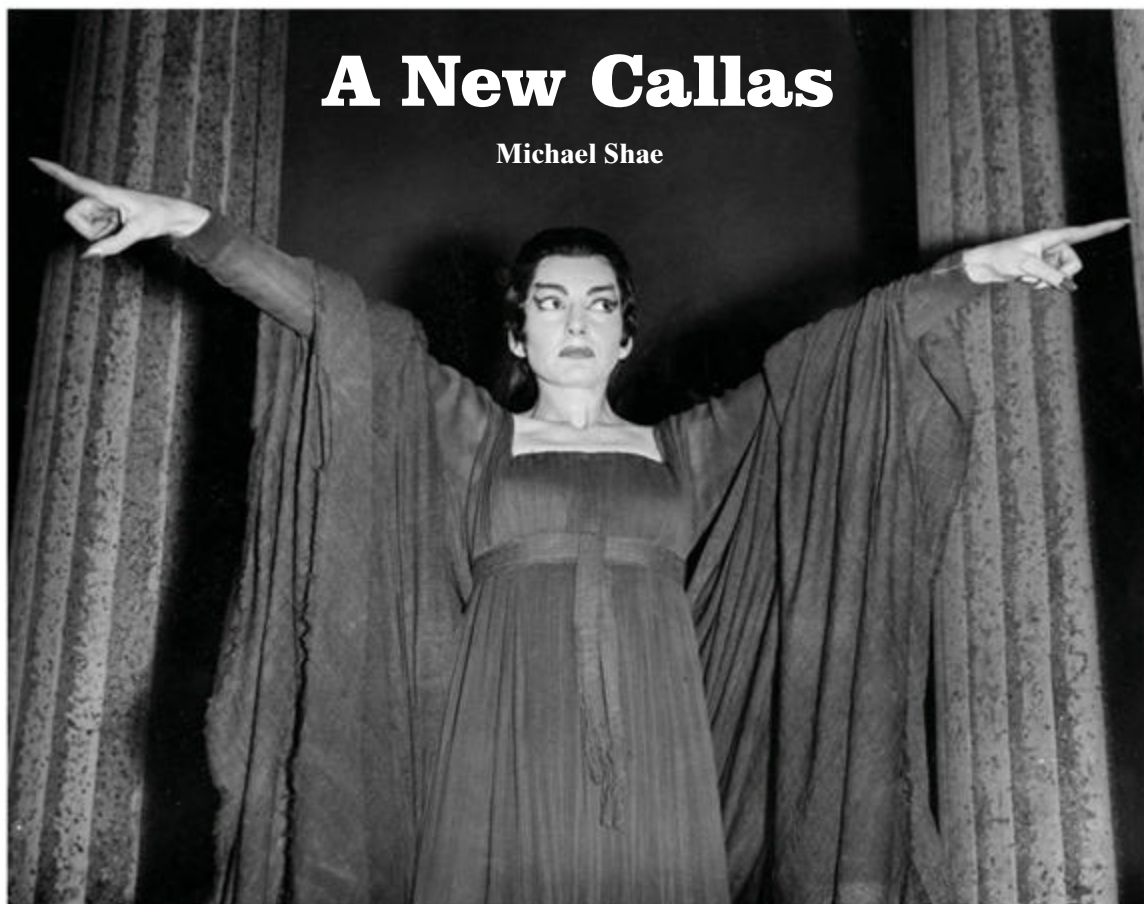
**Maria Callas Remastered:  
The Complete Studio  
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Maria Callas converted me to opera. I am sure I am not unique in this, except in the particulars. In my early college years I immersed myself in recordings of the nineteenth-century symphonic repertory—Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, Bruckner, the Russians—but for a long time I refused to listen to opera, would listen to an overture and then rush to change the record before the singing started. Then one day my roommate put the 1953 *Tosca* with Callas on the turntable and dropped the needle onto “Vissi d’arte.” I had no idea what she was singing, but near the conclusion of that imploring aria, as she comes to the end of the arching wordless phrase that soars from an A down slightly to a G, there is an audible intake of breath. She gasps—or is it a sob?

Maybe she misjudged her breathing, but I can no more assess it in such terms now than I could then. It sounded—it still sounds—to me like pure emotion. I didn’t need to know, at that moment, that *Tosca* was asking God why, despite all her devotion to art, to the Virgin, she was being forced to submit to the advances of the Roman police chief in order to save her lover from execution. That gasp—not a note, not even something musical—opened up an operatic world to me, a world of feeling pushed to an extreme, that in large measure became defined for me by Callas.

Yet if I hadn’t been hooked by a gasp, I would eventually have been hooked by her way with something else—a word, a phrase, an aria, an entire scene. For what made Callas a great singer was her fierce commitment to the voice as a means of dramatic expression. This must be stressed: her fame as an artist came not from gossip about her temper or her cancellations or her relationship with Aristotle Onassis. She was not great because of her “acting,” some mesmerizing physical gestures that we must trust those who actually saw her to verify. If that was primarily what she brought to her performances, she would be a dim legend by now. (The few extant videos of her that we have—mostly in recital—suggest rather how inward her identification with her characters was, how restrained her gestures onstage must have been.)

It is the other way around. Callas was a great actress because she was a great musician, because she understood that for a singer the drama is above all in the voice: in phrasing, in shaping the vocal line, in executing a perfect descending scale, in giving every word—even, or especially, in recitatives—its proper emphasis. Nothing is passed over, nothing ignored or slighted. (Listen, for example, to the monastery scene from Verdi’s *La Forza del Destino*: you need only to hear her to understand Leonora’s desperation, that her very chance for salvation is at stake.) Callas’s voice is instantly recognizable, intensely focused, it is theater; it is why, nearly forty years after her death, nearly fifty



Maria Callas in Luigi Cherubini’s *Medea*, Covent Garden, London, 1959

after her last stage performance, she remains her studio’s best-selling classical singer, as her recordings constantly find new admirers and provoke fresh arguments over their merits.

Before her first performances of Leonora in Verdi’s *Il Trovatore* in 1950, Callas’s mentor, the conductor Tullio Serafin, refused to help her learn the role for another conductor. So she “plunged into the score...absorbing every note and expression mark,” writes John Ardoin in *The Callas Legacy* (1977), with the result that “the wealth of detail her voice unearths here is breathtaking. It is as if an old painting, familiar but dim, has been cleaned to its original tints.”

The same could be said of *Maria Callas Remastered*, the new edition of all of her studio recordings—twenty-six operas and thirteen recital discs, the earliest from 1949, the last from 1969. Performances long familiar from LPs or the two earlier, less careful CD transfers now leap from the speakers with vivid clarity of sound and virtually no background noise even in the mono recordings. Engineers at Warner Classics (which acquired EMI, the company that produced most of them, in 2013) went back to the original master tapes and production notes from the recording sessions to create what finally must be, at least until the next advance in the technology of sound reproduction, the definitive digital version. (The book included in the complete set gives a detailed account of the process.)

*Maria Callas Remastered*, by bringing us as close as we can come to what she must have sounded like, at least in the studio, is an opportunity to rediscover what made her so electrifying. In her prime her voice had a range of nearly three octaves and a very particular timbre; it was moreover able to negotiate elaborate vocal lines with precision, power, and a variety of tonal shading. She simply sounded like no one else. One Italian critic described her as “a star wandering into a planetary system not its own.” But her voice

had more than technical facility. It was also uncommonly expressive: it was what Leo Lerman called “the most haunting voice I have ever heard... filled with lost joys, permeated with present despair.”

It was, to be sure, a voice that was not conventionally beautiful in the way that, for example, her contemporary Renata Tebaldi’s was. (Tebaldi, who mostly sang late Verdi and Puccini roles, could not match Callas’s skill in coloratura or more importantly her theatrical sense, though admirers of sheer vocal beauty often held her up as a counterexample to what they considered Callas’s shortcomings.) From the beginning Callas’s voice could be uneven; as Ardoin writes, it “divided into three distinct registers: a bottled, covered low voice; a reedy middle; and a top that was brilliant at times to the point of stridency and that would, without warning, threaten to wobble out of control.” Over the two decades represented in this collection she underwent a marked vocal decline; by the 1960s the wobble had become persistent and her tone could turn raw.

You can hear the changes in her voice in the two studio versions of *Norma* from 1954 and 1960. It was the role she sang more than any other—nearly ninety times between 1948 and 1965. Its demands are not only vocal, from coloratura to martial declamation, but emotional, from mystical reverie to fury to interior monologue to supplication. Over almost twenty years, Callas developed for *Norma* her most penetrating dramatic insights, meticulously differentiating the Druid priestess, the mother, the warrior, the anxious, then raging, then reconciled mistress. By 1960 she no longer sings with the same security as in 1954, though there are compensations for the sense of vocal strain: her interpretation is more affecting, the phrases more poignantly inflected. I do not always prefer the later recording, but I would not want to be without it.

It is sobering, listening to these performances separated by only half a dozen

years, to recall how short a career Callas had. Though she sang her first operas onstage while a conservatory student in Athens just before and during World War II, her first professional engagement outside Greece was at the Verona Arena in 1947, when she was twenty-three. In her early years she was cast primarily in Wagnerian and verismo roles like *Isolde*, *La Gioconda*, and *Turandot* that required a voice powerful enough to soar over a large orchestra. Then in 1949, in Venice, where she was singing Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre*, she substituted on short notice for an ailing soprano as Elvira in Bellini’s *I Puritani*, a role that requires a completely different kind of voice, one with vocal agility in coloratura passages and the ability to sustain long lyrical lines suffused with pathos.

Other sopranos have sung both Brünnhilde and Norma without attempting the fragile Elvira. Yet it was more than a virtuosoic stunt: it was a revelation. Callas, by fusing

the weight and color of her dramatic soprano voice with the nineteenth-century bel canto technique she had absorbed as a student, rediscovered the emotional depths in roles that had long been performed, if they were performed at all, by light-voiced sopranos as pretexts for mindless vocal display. When she sang Lucia di Lammermoor, Violetta in *La Traviata*, Anna Bolena, or Imogene in *Il Pirata*, they once again became fully dimensional tragic figures.

It was the beginning of the revitalization of an entire repertory: in the following decades operas by Bellini, Donizetti, and Rossini that had fallen out of favor over the previous century were pulled from dusty archives and became vehicles for Leyla Gencer, Joan Sutherland, Montserrat Caballé, and Beverly Sills, among others. Many of them had superb voices; hardly any could approach Callas’s gift for seizing the dramatic possibilities in such works.

For a few magical years in the 1950s she seemed unconstrained by conventional vocal categories, able to adapt her voice equally to the wistful tones of Anina in Bellini’s *La Sonnambula* and the menacing ones of Verdi’s Lady Macbeth. But her conquests of such a wide range of roles came at a cost. Her vocal flaws became harder and harder to control. She gave her last performance of a complete opera in 1965, but by then her voice had been unreliable for more than five years.<sup>1</sup> Her greatest accomplishments were packed into barely more than a decade.

Callas was fortunate that her emergence coincided with the introduction of the long-playing record in 1948, which meant that recording companies were keen to build their catalogs in the new format. She began recording for the Italian label Cetra in 1949, with an album of arias, followed by complete recordings of *La Traviata* and *La Gioconda* (all of which are included in the newly remastered set). That first Cetra

<sup>1</sup>The best account of her decline is Will Crutchfield’s “The Story of a Voice,” *The New Yorker*, November 13, 1995.



**I have no memories of Diane Arbus.** *Not even of a phone call, let alone a face-to-face meeting. I was eight years old when she killed herself. They tell me I was playing baseball in the backyard in St. Louis when the phone rang, but I do not remember even that.*

*Maybe that was because she was a secret in our house. Her brother, Howard Nemerov, my father, did not say much about her that I recall. They were close, yes, especially when they were children, but she was out of his mind, so far as I could tell, in those years when I grew up.*

*A sign of this was the fate of a photograph she gave him — a print of her most famous one, Identical twins, Roselle, N.J. 1966, made out to him along the white edge at the bottom: “for h.” “Diane Arbus.” It was a photograph he never matted, never framed, and never even displayed. Instead, it was kept in a drawer in the living room of our house, mingled among my childhood drawing supplies, the sheets of paper and colored pens. Predictably in that place the photograph suffered damage, creases and some cracks in the emulsion. Meanwhile, across the room, my father hung a large ponderous landscape painting by his father, David Nemerov, a person I don’t think he liked very much, on the wall above the couch. Countryside Serenity was the title, inscribed on a golden plaque on the gold-and-white frame. . . .*

**ALEXANDER NEMEROV**

from *Silent Dialogues: Diane Arbus & Howard Nemerov*

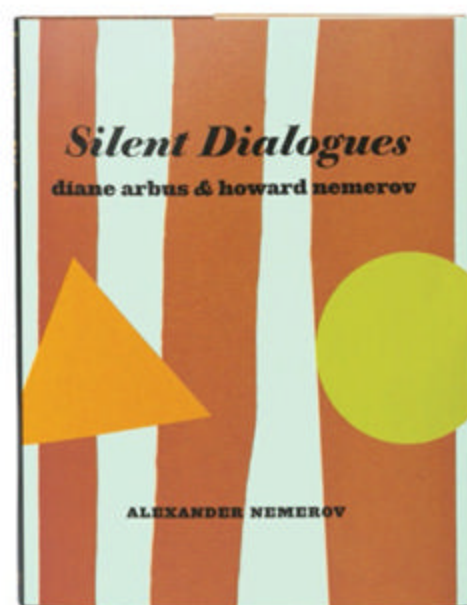
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album, with Isolde's *Liebestod* and the "Casta Diva" from *Norma* as well as Elvira's mad scene from *I Puritani*, already displays her extraordinary range. By 1953 she had been lured to the much bigger British multinational EMI, for which she recorded until 1969, and which enabled her to reach a far larger audience across Europe and the US.

*Maria Callas Remastered* does not, of course, give us Callas whole: there are also many recordings of live performances from opera houses and concert stages, beginning in 1949, that preserve important roles that she never recorded in full in the studio, such as Abigail in *Nabucco* and Elena in *I Vespri Siciliani*; in many cases where both exist, the live recordings capture her in better voice or more dramatically engaged. Her best *Norma*, for example, is neither of the studio versions but the live performance from La Scala's opening night in 1955—widely available on CD—that caught her in commanding form.

Vagaries of sound quality in these live recordings aside, her 1955 EMI *Aida* doesn't have the circus thrills of Mexico City in 1951, when she ended the triumphal scene with an unwritten E-flat—though the third-act scene between *Aida* and her father (Tito Gobbi) is far more intense in the studio. The 1953 studio *Traviata* came too soon, before she had fully plumbed the role, but she is heartbreaking as Violetta at La Scala in 1955 and even more so at Covent Garden three years later. Her raging *Medea* in Dallas in 1958, just after she was fired from the Metropolitan Opera, makes her exhausted studio version from the year before nearly superfluous. But she dazzlingly surpasses her 1951 performance in Florence of the fifth-act *Bolero* from *I Vespri Siciliani* on the 1954 album *Lyric and Coloratura Arias*, her voice seeming to echo itself in its cascading roulades of sound.

I found myself, however, almost morbidly listening over and over to what has widely been considered the least successful of her recordings, the second, stereo *Lucia* of 1959—one of the very few I had never heard until I got the new set. So it comes as some surprise to read, in the book accompanying *Maria Callas Remastered*, her producer Walter Legge's comments about it: "Unless I am very much mistaken it will be a sensational success. Callas has never sung so well..."

One imagines that Legge must have been reassuring the executives at EMI, for the performance lacks the fearless brilliance of her 1953 studio recording (in mono) of the role. It also lacks the plaintive despair of the live performance from Berlin in 1955, in which the notes veering in and out of control in the mad scene seem to purposefully reflect *Lucia*'s own unhinged mind. Where once the fragility of the voice seemed calculated to convey the fragility of the character, it is now too easy to hear the singer's fragility. Some high notes waver uncomfortably, there are unaccustomed compromises in some of the more florid passages, and the supporting cast sounds more provincial than in her previous *Lucias*.

So one wonders why this was a priority for EMI at the time. Yes, the sound is better, but the singing isn't. Did the advent of stereo recordings

in 1958 really mean that EMI needed to replace the splendid earlier mono *Lucia* rather than have Callas set down before the microphones any number of her other important roles that she hadn't recorded? Why a new *Lucia* and not *Macbeth* or *Anna Bolena*, in both of which she triumphed at La Scala but of which she recorded only excerpts?

Such inscrutable commercial decisions haunt her entire recording career. Why record *Manon Lescaut* and *La Bohème*—roles she never sang on-stage—instead of *I Vespri Siciliani* or *Il Pirata*, which she did? Presumably EMI's assessment of the market dictated giving priority to better-known works even if she had no association with them. Perhaps no one expected her career to be so brief, even as she

realign her voice and studying scores anew. There she worked with young singers of all vocal types, before an audience that included famous singers, conductors, instrumentalists, directors, critics, and fans. It was the hot ticket of the season.<sup>2</sup>

In her classes she dutifully instructs her students to observe meticulously the details of the score and to understand the meaning of the words they are singing, advises them on their breathing and even on their clothes. She is frank and friendly and sometimes funny. The most thrilling moments, though, come when she is so caught up in the music that she takes over and sings along with them to demonstrate her points. Even hoarse her voice flashes to life. Has any baritone sung Rigoletto's "Cortigiani,



Maria Callas as the singer Floria Tosca and Tito Gobbi as the Roman police chief Baron Scarpia in Franco Zeffirelli's production of Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca* at the Paris Opera, February 1965

was performing less and less frequently and less and less consistently well.

With the exception of a few arias recorded in 1969 and 1972, Callas stopped recording as well as performing in 1965. For the rest of the decade she and EMI discussed many projects that never came to fruition, primarily and frequently a new *Traviata*; the booklet reproduces letters from EMI executives laying out plans for performances and recordings, though one also hears their exasperation at the priority she was giving her social life—attending premieres with Georges Pompidou or Elizabeth Taylor—over her musical commitments. But it is equally likely that she had taken the measure of what she could accomplish and the disadvantage of competing with herself; her voice was too well documented on recordings that her audiences could be counted on to have heard wherever she sang.

She eventually agreed, unwisely, to a worldwide recital tour in 1973–1974 with the tenor Giuseppe di Stefano, with whom she had often sung in the 1950s. By then not only was her voice in ruins, but she seemed to many who heard her to have lost as well her technique and expressivity, which had long endured even as her voice betrayed her. Far more memorable were the master classes she gave at Juilliard in 1971–1972, at a time when she was trying to

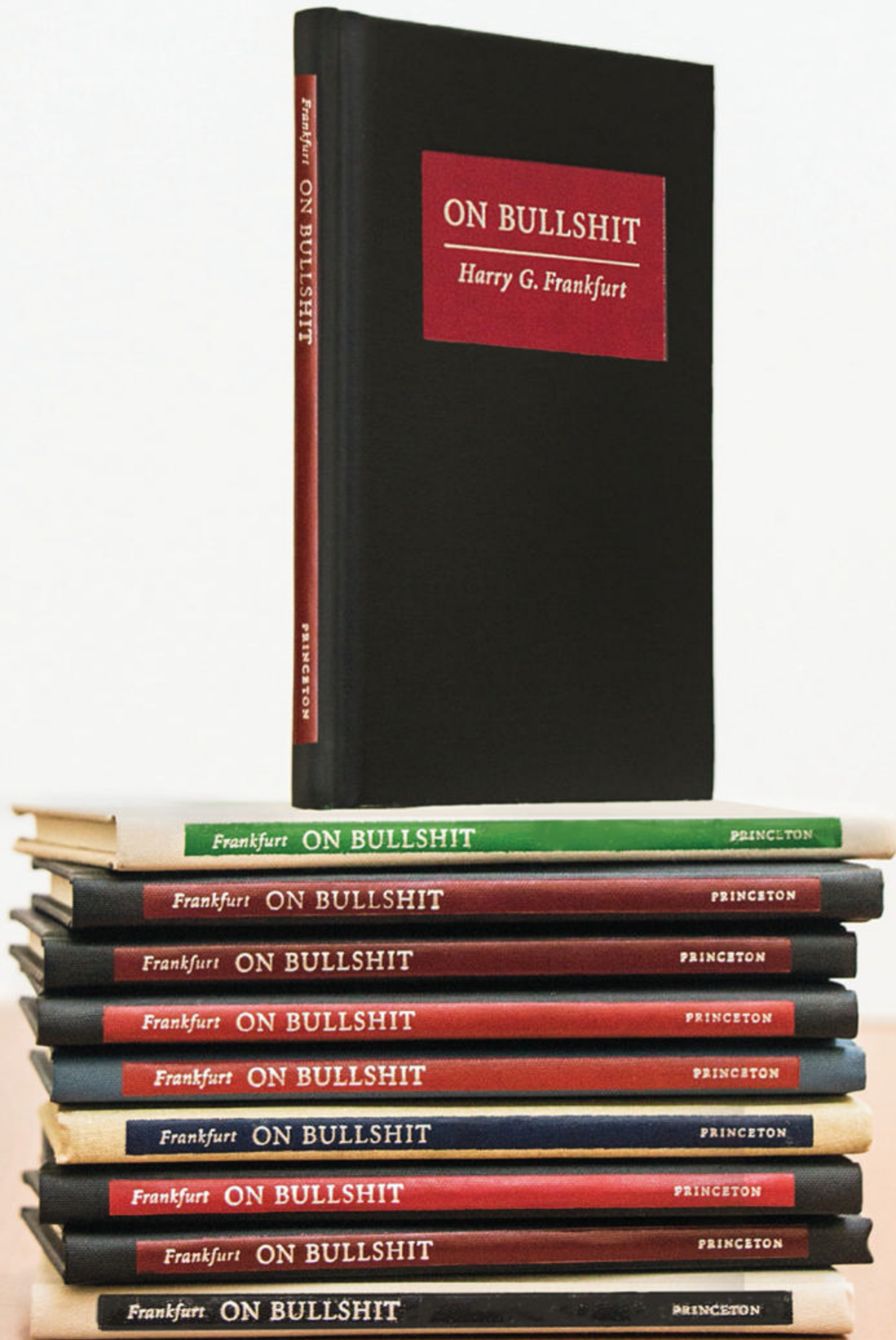
vil razza dannata" with as much ferocious urgency as she does while teaching it? Her student can't sing it "like an animal," as she tells him—and shows him—he must. Yet her musical intelligence may have been too intuitive, too singular, too inimitable to pass on.

One must resist living entirely in a golden operatic past accessible only through recordings. Opera requires the excitement and uncertainty of live performance and an openness to new singers who can bring their own unexpected insights to their characters. But we learn to listen to them by listening to their great predecessors. Callas wasn't perfect, to be sure. (And perfect can be boring, as some of her successors have demonstrated.) But even when she falls short of her best, she gives an intimation of what an ideal performance might sound like. Few more perfect singers have managed to do that. □

<sup>2</sup>Fortunately the classes were recorded. John Ardoin's transcriptions of them were published as *Callas at Juilliard: The Master Classes* (1987; Amadeus, 2003), but there is no substitute for hearing them. EMI released a three-CD selection in 1995, which for comparison paired classes on arias Callas had sung herself (from *Norma*, *Don Giovanni*, *Don Carlo*, *Werther*, and others) with her studio recordings of them. The complete series of classes can be heard online at [sites.google.com/site/operalala/CallasJuilliard](http://sites.google.com/site/operalala/CallasJuilliard).



# 10 years later and it's still piled high





# Shakespeare in Tehran

Stephen Greenblatt

In April 2014 I received a letter from the University of Tehran, inviting me to deliver the keynote address to the first Iranian Shakespeare Congress.

Instantly, I decided to go. I had dreamed of visiting Iran for a very long time. Many years ago, when I was a student at Cambridge, I came across a book of pictures of Achaemenid art, the art of the age of Cyrus and Darius and Xerxes. Struck by the elegance, sophistication, and strangeness of what I saw, I took the train to London and in the British Museum stood staring in wonder at fluted, horn-shaped drinking vessels, griffin-headed bracelets, a tiny gold chariot drawn by four exquisite gold horses, and other implausible survivals from the vanished Persian world.

The culture that produced the objects on display at once tantalized and eluded me. A Cambridge friend recommended that I read an old travelogue about Persia. (I had completely forgotten the name and author of this marvelous book, forgotten even that I had read it, until the great travel writer Colin Thubron very recently commended it to me: Robert Byron's *The Road to Oxiana*, published in 1937.) Byron's sharp-eyed, richly evocative descriptions of Islamic as well as ancient sites in Iran filled me with a longing to see with my own eyes the land where such a complex civilization had flourished.

In the mid-1960s, this desire of mine could have been easily satisfied. Some fellow students invited me to do what many others had been doing on summer vacations: pooling funds to buy a used VW bus and driving across Persia and Afghanistan and then, skirting the tribal territories, descending through the Khyber Pass into Pakistan and on to India. But for one reason or another, I decided to put it off—after all, I told myself, there would always be another occasion.

By the time the letter arrived inviting me to Tehran, it was difficult fully to conjure up the old dream. I knew from Iranian acquaintances that, notwithstanding some highly sophisticated and justly praised films—many of them shown only abroad—censorship of all media in Iran is rampant and draconian. Spies, some self-appointed and others professional, sit in on lectures and in classrooms, making sure that nothing is said that violates the official line.

Support for basic civil liberties, advocating women's rights or the rights of gays and lesbians, an interest in free expression, and the most tempered and moderate skepticism about the tenets of religious orthodoxy are enough to trigger denunciations and arouse the ire of the authorities. Iranian exiles have detailed entirely credible horror stories of their treatment—pressure, intimidat-

tion, imprisonment, and in some cases torture—at the hands of the Islamic Republic. A small number of aid organizations, such as the Scholars at Risk Network and the Scholar Rescue Fund, have struggled tirelessly, though with painfully limited financial resources, to help the victims escape from imminent danger and begin to put their lives together again.

If I went to the Iranian Shakespeare Congress, it would not be with the pretense that our situations were comparable or that our underlying values and beliefs were identical. Sharing

to drink water without their [Zionists'] permission?"

If I were to ask him directly—which I did not propose to do—I assume he would distinguish, as the Iranian government does, between Zionists and Jews. But why should I confidently expect that this distinction would actually hold? True, he did not know that, as an eleven-year-old at Camp Tevya, in the New Hampshire woods, I fervently sang "Hatikvah." But from my writing he had to be aware that I was Jewish, and he could have easily learned from my acknowledgments that I have fre-

I had almost given up hope and then in November, the day before my scheduled flight to Tehran, the visa was issued. There was no explanation for the delay.

I found myself then on a Lufthansa jet listening to an announcement, just before we touched down at Imam Khomeini Airport, reminding all female passengers that in the Islamic Republic wearing the *hijab*—the headscarf—was not a custom; it was the law. "Women on board," the flight attendant put it,

"must understand that it is in their interest to put on a scarf before they leave the plane." And there, waiting for me when I deplaned at 1:00 AM, was none other than the author of the articles denouncing the secret Zionist investors who controlled the world. He was smiling, gregarious, urbane. Quickly establishing our shared interest in movies, we chatted happily about Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon*, Ermanno Olmi's *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*, and the 1957 classic western *3:10 to Yuma*.

We drove into town, past the omnipresent billboards of Ayatollah Khomeini and of the current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. It was well after two when we reached the hotel, a former Sheraton rechristened (if that is the right word) the Homa. Though I knew that the

conference would begin first thing in the morning, I found myself too wound up to sleep. I lay in bed staring up at an aluminum arrow embedded in the ceiling to show the direction of Mecca. I was anxious about the keynote I was scheduled to deliver. I did not want to stage a provocation: I was less concerned for myself than I was for the organizing committee and the students, since I presumed it would be they who would bear the consequences. But at the same time I did not want to let the occasion simply slip away without somehow grappling with what it meant.

I entered a hall filled with eager faces—everyone rose and applauded as I walked down the aisle. Many held up their phones and took pictures. All the women, of course, wore *hijabs*; some of them wore *chadors*. The young men were casually dressed; the faculty wore jackets without ties. I also noticed among the men a few who stood apart and did not seem to be either students or faculty. It was not difficult to imagine who these might be. There was a long prayer, accompanied by a video featuring soft-focus flowers and dramatic landscapes, and then the national anthem, followed by an implausibly long succession of introductions. I felt weirdly nervous as I got up to give my talk.

What did it mean that Shakespeare was the magic carpet that had carried



Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque in Isfahan, the last stop on Stephen Greenblatt's trip to Iran

an interest in Shakespeare counts for something, as a warm and encouraging phone call from the principal organizer amply demonstrated, but it does not magically erase all differences. A simple check online showed me that one of the scholars who signed my letter of invitation had written, in addition to essays on "The Contradictory Nature of the Ghost in *Hamlet*" and "The Aesthetic Response: The Reader in *Macbeth*," many articles about the "gory diabolical adventurism" of international Zionism. "The tentacles of Zionist imperialism," he wrote, "are by slow gradation spread over [the world]." "A precocious smile of satisfaction breaks upon the ugly face of Zionism." "The Zionist labyrinthine corridors are so numerous that their footprints and their agents are scattered everywhere."

Did my prospective host—someone who had presumably grappled with the humane complexity of Shakespeare's tragedies—actually believe these fantasies reminiscent of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*? Was he simply trying to get ahead any way that he could, or did he really think, as he wrote, that "Washington is under the diabolical spell of the Zionists" and that "every step they take is in fact weighed and decided by the Zionist lobby within the US ruling system, and as the Persian saying goes, they are not even allowed

quently visited Israel, lecturing at its universities and collaborating with its scholars. What did it mean then that he was sending a letter of invitation to me, of all people?

Just after the revolution, the leader of the Iranian Jewish community, Habib Elghanian, was arrested on charges of "contacts with Israel and Zionism," "friendship with the enemies of God," and "warring with God and his emissaries." Elghanian was executed by firing squad. Following this execution, large numbers of Iranian Jews emigrated, and those who stayed are mindful of the fact that "contacts with Israel and Zionism" remain a serious offense. Foreign travelers with any evidence in their passports of visiting Israel are denied admission to Iran. Yet in my case, Shakespeare, it seemed, somehow erased the offense and bridged the huge chasm between us.

Perhaps there was no bridge at all: the invitation was signed by more than one person, and I considered the possibility that there were different positions among the organizing committee and that the more hard-line members had signed off on the invitation in the belief that I would never come or, alternatively, that I would never receive a visa. As it happened, though I was invited in April and duly submitted my visa application, I heard nothing from the Iranian authorities. Months passed.

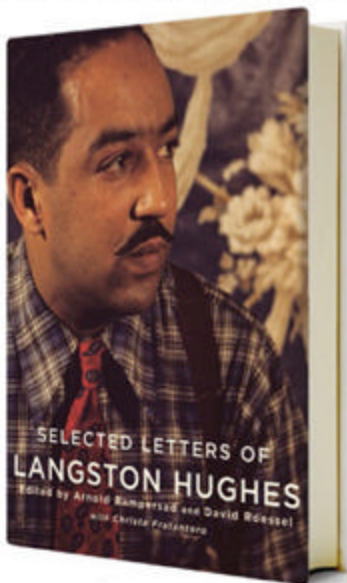
Marco Moretti/Anzenberger/Redux





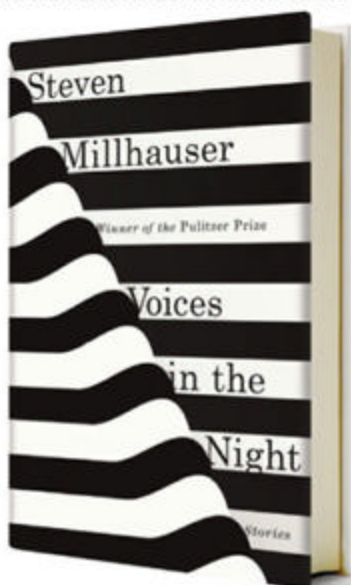
*The Book of Unknown Americans*  
**CRISTINA HENRÍQUEZ**

"Vivid...A ringing paean to love between man and wife, parent and child, outsider and newcomer, pilgrims and promised land." —*Washington Post*  
A *New York Times* Notable Book.



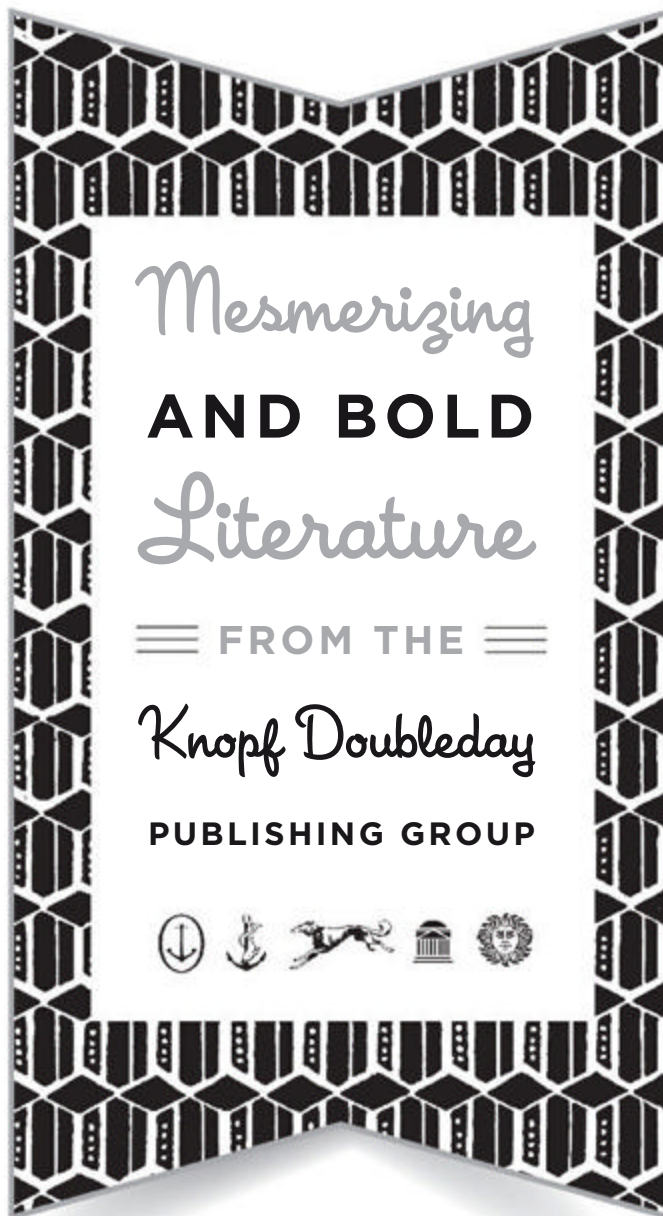
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A glorious, comprehensive selection.  
"These letters reflect the humanity, passion and dreams that shaped his art."  
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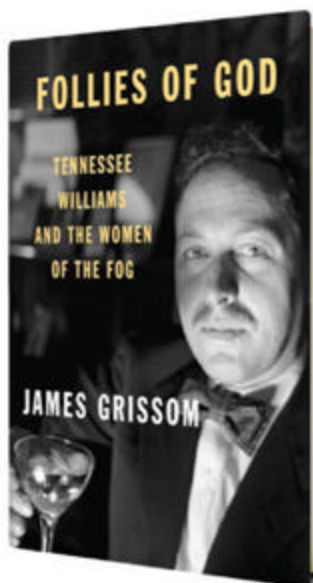
*Voices in the Night*  
**STEVEN MILLHAUSER**

"A master storyteller continues to navigate the blurry space between magic and reality in comic, frightening tales...Superb." —*Kirkus*



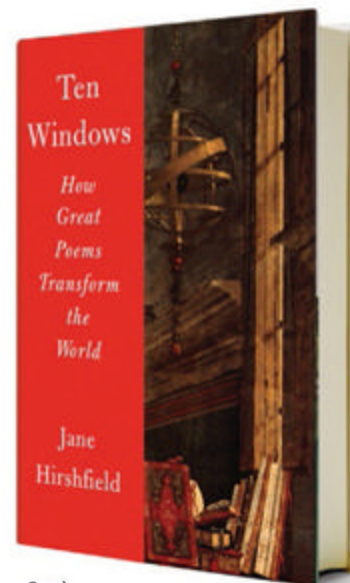
*The Buried Giant*  
**KAZUO ISHIGURO**

"A beautiful fable with a hard message at its core... there won't, I suspect, be a more important work of fiction published this year."  
—*The Times* (London)  
"A spectacular, rousing departure from anything Ishiguro has ever written, and yet a classic Ishiguro story...Graceful, original and humane."  
—*The Washington Post*



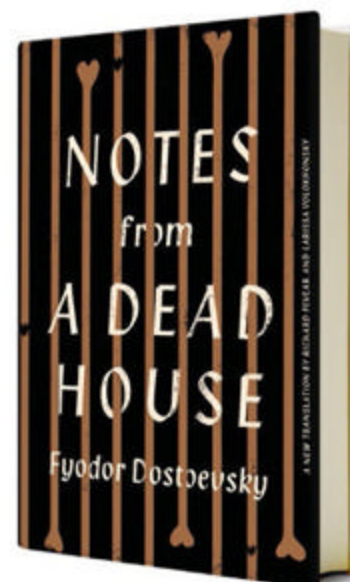
*Follies of God*  
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"Few people have captured so well Tennessee's strange mixture of fear and admiration for women... and his miraculous ability to work the magic of their strengths and weaknesses into some of the most powerful roles in the American theater. Lillian Gish, Maureen Stapleton, Jessica Tandy, Katharine Hepburn."  
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"Enchants the mind and ravages the heart." —*More*



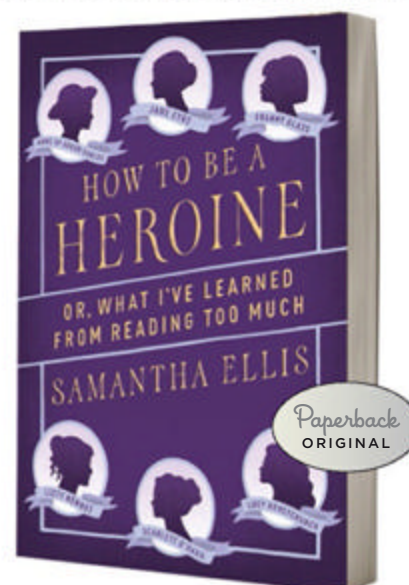
*Ten Windows*  
**JANE HIRSHFIELD**

"In twenty or thirty years, this book may be remembered as one of the great common-readers on the pleasures of poetry... Intoxicating." —*Library Journal*



*Notes From a Dead House*  
**FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY**

A new translation from Richard Pevar and Larissa Volokhonsky, the "premier Russian-to-English translators of the era."  
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**SAMANTHA ELLIS**

"A delightful and hilarious memoir."  
—*The Economist*



me to Iran? For more than four centuries now he has served as a crucial link across the boundaries that divide cultures, ideologies, religions, nations, and all the other ways in which humans define and demarcate their identities. The differences, of course, remain—Shakespeare cannot simply erase them—and yet he offers the opportunity for what he called “atonement.” He used the word in the special sense, no longer current, of “at-one-ment,” a bringing together in shared dialogue of those who have been for too long opposed and apart.

It was the project of many in my generation of Shakespeare scholars to treat this dialogue with relentless skepticism, to disclose the ideological interests it at once served and concealed, to burrow into works’ original settings, and to explore the very different settings in which they are now received. We wanted to identify, as it were, the secret police lurking in their theater or in the printing house. All well and good: it has been exciting work and has sustained me and my contemporaries for many decades. But we have almost completely neglected to inquire how Shakespeare managed to make his work a place in which we can all meet.

This was the question with which I began. The simple answer, I said, is encapsulated in the word “genius,” the quality he shares with the poets—Hafez, for example, or Rumi—who are venerated in Iran. But the word “genius” does not convey much beyond extravagant admiration. I proposed to my audience that we get slightly closer perhaps with Ben Jonson’s observation that Shakespeare was “honest, and of an open and free nature; had an excellent fancy, brave notions, and gentle expressions.”

Jonson’s praise of Shakespeare’s imaginative and verbal powers—his fancy, his notions, and his expressions—is familiar enough and, of course, perfectly just. But I proposed to focus for a moment on terms that seem at first more like a personality assessment: “honest, and of an open and free nature.” That assessment, I suggested, was also and inescapably a political one. Here is how I continued:

Late-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century England was a closed and decidedly unfree society, one in which it was extremely dangerous to be honest in the expression of one’s innermost thoughts. Government spies carefully watched public spaces, such as taverns and inns, and took note of what they heard. Views that ran counter to the official line of the Tudor and Stuart state or that violated the orthodoxy of the Christian church authorities were frequently denounced and could lead to terrible consequences. An agent of the police recorded the playwright Christopher Marlowe’s scandalously anti-Christian opinions and filed a report, for the queen of England was also head of the church. Marlowe was eventually murdered by members of the Elizabethan security service, though they disguised the murder as a tavern brawl. Along the way, Marlowe’s roommate, the playwright Thomas Kyd, was questioned under torture so severe that he died shortly after.

To be honest, open, and free in

such a world was a rare achievement. We could say it would have been possible, even easy, for someone whose views of state and church happened to correspond perfectly to the official views, and it has certainly been persuasively argued that Shakespeare’s plays often reflect what has been called the Elizabethan world-picture. They depict a hierarchical society in which noble blood counts for a great deal, the many-headed multitude is easily swayed in irrational directions, and respect for order and degree seems paramount.

But it is difficult then to explain quite a few moments in his work. Take, for example, the scene in which Claudius, who has secretly murdered the legitimate king of Denmark and seized his throne, declares, in the face of a popular uprising, that “There’s such divinity doth hedge a king/ That treason can but peep to what it would.” It would have been wildly imprudent, in Elizabethan England, to propose that the invocation of divine protection, so pervasive from the pulpit and in the councils of state, was merely a piece of official rhetoric, designed to shore up whatever regime was in power. But how else could the audience of *Hamlet* understand this moment? Claudius the poisoner knows that no divinity protected the old king, sleeping in his garden, and that his treason could do much more than peep. His pious words are merely a way to mystify his power and pacify the naive Laertes.

Or take the scene in which King Lear, who has fallen into a desperate and hunted state, encounters the blinded Earl of Gloucester. “A man may see how this world goes with no eyes,” Lear says; “Look with thine ears.” And what, if you listen attentively, will you then “see”?

See how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief. Hark, in thine ear. Change places and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief?

Nothing in the dominant culture of the time encouraged anyone—let alone several thousand random people crowded into the theater—to play the thought experiment of exchanging the places of judge and criminal. No one in his right mind got up in public and declared that the agents of the moral order lusted with the same desires for which they whipped offenders. No one interested in a tranquil, unmolested life said that the robes and furred gowns of the rich hid the vices that showed through the tattered clothes of the poor. Nor did anyone who wanted to remain in safety come forward and declare, as Lear does a moment later, that “a dog’s obeyed in office.”

That Shakespeare was able to articulate such thoughts in public

depended in part on the fact that they are the views of a character, and not of the author himself; in part on the fact that the character is represented as having gone mad; in part on the fact that the play *King Lear* is situated in the ancient past and not in the present. Shakespeare never directly represented living authorities or explicitly expressed his own views on contemporary arguments in state or church. He knew that, though play scripts were read and censored and though the theater was watched, the police were infrequently called to intervene in what appeared on stage, provided that the spectacle prudently avoided blatantly pro-



Students in a mosque, studying for exams, Shiraz, 1971

vocative reflections on current events.

Still, such interventions were not unheard of. It is astonishing that in *King Lear* Shakespeare goes so far as to show a nameless servant rising up to stop his master, the powerful Earl of Cornwall, who is the legitimate ruler of the kingdom, from torturing someone whom he suspects—correctly, as it happens—of treason. “Hold your hand, my lord,” the servant shouts:

*I have served you ever since I was a child;  
But better service have I never done you  
Than now to bid you hold.*

The original audience must have been as shocked by this interference as the torturer Cornwall. Though the servant is killed by a sword thrust from behind, it is not before he has fatally wounded his master. And what is most shocking is that the audience is clearly meant to sympathize with the attempt by a nobody to stop the highest authority in the land from doing what everyone knew the state did to trai-

tors. Here there is no cover of presumed madness, and though the setting is still ancient Britain, the circumstances must have seemed unnervingly close to contemporary practice.

How could Shakespeare get away with it? The answer must in part be that Elizabethan and Jacobean society, though oppressive, was not as monolithic in its surveillance or as efficient in its punitive responses as the surviving evidence sometimes makes us think. Shakespeare’s world probably had more diversity of views, more room to breathe, than the official documents imply.

There is, I think, another reason as well, which leads us back to why after four hundred years and across vast social, cultural, and religious differences Shakespeare’s works continue to reach us. He seems to have folded his most subversive perceptions about his particular time and place into a much larger vision of what his characters repeatedly and urgently term their life stories. We are assigned the task of keeping these stories alive, and in doing so we might find a way, even in difficult circumstances, to be free, honest, and open in talking about our own lives.

My talk took more than an hour, and when I brought it to a close, I expected there to be a rush for the exit. But to my surprise, everyone stayed seated, and there began a question period, a flood of inquiries and challenges stretching out for the better part of another hour. Most of the questions were from students, the majority of them women, whose boldness, critical intelligence, and articulateness startled me. Very few of the faculty and students had traveled outside of Iran, but the questions were, for the most

part, in flawless English and extremely well informed. Even while I tried frantically to think of plausible answers, I jotted a few of them down:

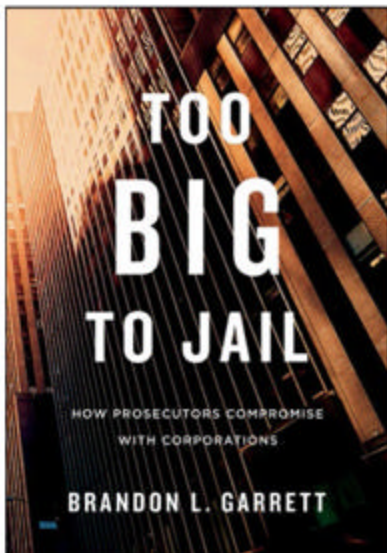
In postmodern times, universality has repeatedly been questioned. How should we reconcile Shakespeare’s universality with contemporary theory?

You said that Shakespeare spent his life turning pieces of his consciousness into stories. Don’t we all do this? What distinguishes him?

Considering your works, is it possible to say that you are refining your New Historicist theory when we compare it with Cultural Materialism?

In your *Cultural Mobility* you write about cultural change, pluralism, and tolerance of differences while in your *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* you talk about an unfree subject who is the ideological product of the relations of power: *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* is filled with entrapment theory. How can an individual be an unfree ideological





## *Too Big to Jail*

*How Prosecutors Compromise with Corporations*

**Brandon L. Garrett**

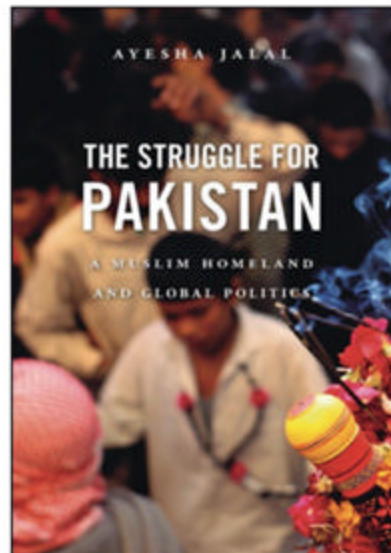
"The breadth of Garrett's investigation, the wealth of detail he uses to support his conclusions, and the clarity of his prose make this an important book."

—Jed Rakoff, *New York Review of Books*

"Future considerations of what to do about [corporate prosecutions] should draw on Brandon Garrett's important work."

—Lawrence Summers, *Financial Times*

Belknap Press / \$29.95



## *The Struggle for Pakistan*

*A Muslim Homeland and Global Politics*

**Ayesha Jalal**

"Perceptive and learned ... [Jalal] shows that Pakistan never went off the rails; it was, moreover, never a democracy in any meaningful sense ... While it is tempting to blame the generals for everything that has gone wrong in Pakistan, Jalal makes it clear that the civilian leadership has been corrupt, petty and small-minded ... *The Struggle for Pakistan* traces Pakistan's decline all the way up to the present."

—Isaac Chotiner, *Wall Street Journal*

Belknap Press / \$35.00



## *The Middle Ages*

**Johannes Fried**

TRANSLATED BY PETER LEWIS

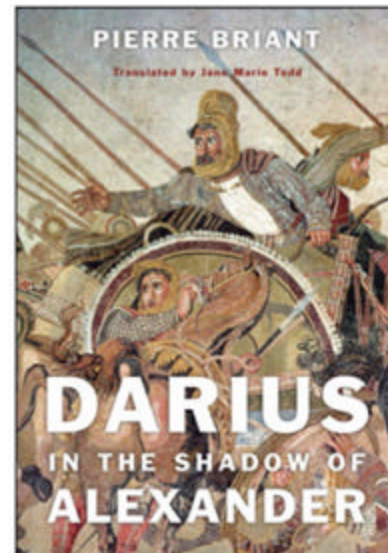
"[Fried] gets down to the business of writing excellent history in this absorbing book."

—Sean McGlynn, *Spectator*

"Fried's breadth of knowledge is formidable and his passion for the period admirable ... Those with a true passion for the Middle Ages will be thrilled by this ambitious *defensio*."

—Dan Jones, *Sunday Times*

Belknap Press / \$35.00



## *Darius in the Shadow of Alexander*

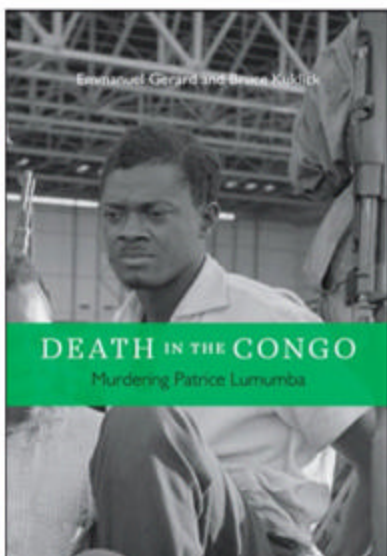
**Pierre Briant**

TRANSLATED BY JANE MARIE TODD

"Briant is the world's leading authority on the Persian empire that Alexander conquered ... His insights are penetrating and his mastery of the evidentiary record is unsurpassed ... Having deftly taken down much of the edifice supplied by the ancient accounts of Darius, Briant finally turns architect and shows us how the rebuilding might begin."

—James Romm, *Wall Street Journal*

\$39.95



## *Death in the Congo*

*Murdering Patrice Lumumba*

**Emmanuel Gerard and Bruce Kuklick**

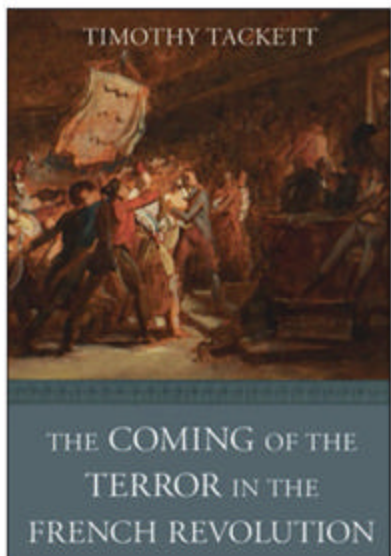
"*Death in the Congo* is history for grown-ups, lucid and unsparing, alert to our infinite capacity for deceit and self-deception."

—John Wilson, *Chicago Tribune*

"[A] worthy primer to the events that plunged the nation into decades of dictatorship under Joseph Mobutu."

—Publishers Weekly

\$29.95



## *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution*

**Timothy Tackett**

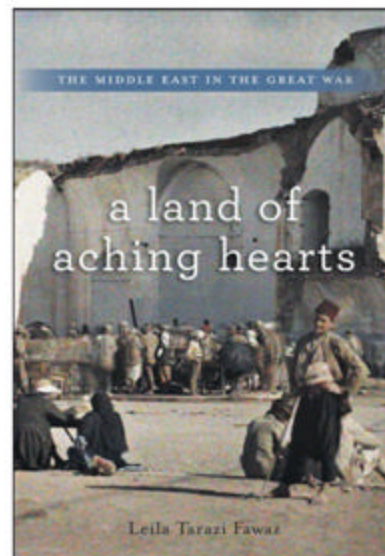
"[A] grippingly written and deeply insightful book."

—Robert Zaretsky,  
*Los Angeles Review of Books*

"[Tackett] analyzes the *mentalité* of those who became 'terrorists' in 18th-century France ... Contributes to an important realignment in the study of French history."

—Ruth Scurr, *The Spectator*

Belknap Press / \$35.00



## *A Land of Aching Hearts*

*The Middle East in the Great War*

**Leila Tarazi Fawaz**

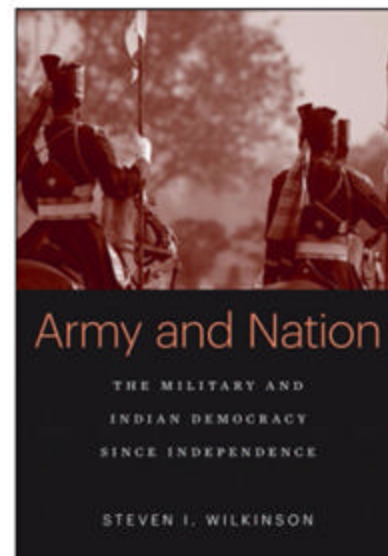
"So much of what World War I unleashed ... reverberates to this day ... As Fawaz does, [historians] should draw on local sources, languages and experiences to restore the Middle East's full complexity rather than reinforcing the blinkered, one-sided narrative of butchers and beheaders."

—Tom Finn, *The Nation*

"A first-rate work of historical investigation."

—Steve Donoghue, *Open Letters Monthly*

\$35.00



## *Army and Nation*

*The Military and Indian Democracy since Independence*

**Steven I. Wilkinson**

"It is a story of what happens when armies fail to reflect the societies they defend, as well as a meditation on Juvenal's famous question ... who shall guard the guards? As India raises 80,000 new troops to face down China, Wilkinson's book is an excellent guide to the world's biggest democratic army. It is also a fine answer to Juvenal's cautionary question."

—Shashank Joshi, *Financial Times*

\$39.95



product of the relations of power and also at the same time an agent in the dialectic of cultural change and persistence?

What the questions demonstrated with remarkable eloquence was the way in which Shakespeare functions as a place to think intensely, honestly, and with freedom. “Do you believe,” one of the students asked, “that Bolingbroke’s revolution in *Richard II* was actually meant to establish a better, more just society or was it finally only a cynical seizure of wealth and power?” “I don’t know,” I answered; “What do you think?” “I think,” the student replied, “that it was merely one group of thugs replacing another.”

## 2.

And the Iran I had so longed to see, some fifty years ago? My visa permitted me a few days’ stay after the conference, and the principal organizer, an exceptionally kind and hospitable woman, helped me arrange for a car and driver, along with a guide—Americans, I was told, were not permitted to travel unaccompanied. (It was just as well, since I had only learned two or three words of Farsi.) Hussain, the driver, had no English, so I was unable to express directly the admiration I had for the astonishing skill with which he negotiated the insane Tehran traffic.

Hassan, the guide, had at least an uneven smattering of English. He was born, he told me, in the year of the Revolution and did not like to think of what

Iran was like before then, when women did not wear the *hijab* and everyone drank alcohol. (He seemed genuinely shocked when I told him that my wife and I had a glass of wine almost every night with dinner.) At least by the admittedly lax standards to which I am accustomed, he was quite religiously observant. He prayed multiple times a day, often in the “prayer rooms” that are a feature of all hotels and other public buildings. In the mosques he joined the crowds of the faithful who ardently kiss the metal railings around the tombs of the saints and then rub the blessings over their faces. He had a serious cold.

Hussain managed to dodge and feint and bully his way through the vastness of Tehran, most of whose twelve million inhabitants seemed to be on the road. The palatial mansions in the north of the city gave way to seemingly endless miles of office blocks, apartment complexes, factories, shopping malls, and huge army barracks. Hassan warned me not to take pictures of the barracks—I was not inclined to, in any case—or of the huge, sinister Evin prison. There were security cameras, he said, that could detect whether anyone in passing cars was trying to take photographs. Billboards advertising computers, detergent, yogurt, and the like alternated with inspirational images of the Ayatollah Khomeini, political slogans, satirical depictions of Uncle Sam and of Israel, and many, many photographs of “martyrs” from the Iran–Iraq war.

There were martyrs along the avenues, in traffic circles, on the sides of buildings, on the walls around the

buildings, on overpasses and pedestrian bridges, everywhere. On the light poles, the martyrs’ images were generally in twos, and the pairings, which may have been accidental, were sometimes striking: a teenager next to a hardened veteran, a raw recruit next to a beribboned high-ranking officer, a bearded fighter next to a sweet-faced young woman.

It took forever to get out of Tehran, but once we crossed the last martyr-festooned overpass, we were suddenly on a highway through an utterly deserted wasteland that extended all the way to Kashan, 150 miles to the south. Kashan is a celebrated carpet city—we had a Kashan rug in our dining room when I was growing up—but my goal was not the crowded bazaar. I wanted to see the late-sixteenth-century Bagh-e Fin, one of the walled enclosures that in old Persian were called “paradises.” (Other English borrowings from Persian include the words *peach*, *lemon*, and *orange*, along with *cummerbund*, *kaftan*, and *pajama*.) Paradise, in this case, was a relatively small, dusty, square garden with very old cedar trees lined up in rows along very straight paths.

For someone whose taste in gardens runs to Rome’s Doria Pamphili or London’s Kew or New York’s Central Park, so rigid a structure was hard to love, but it made sense against the background of the bleak, parched desert through which we had passed. The crucial feature was water arising from a small nearby natural spring, and for the first time I fully grasped the hyperbolic extravagance of the garden in Genesis, harboring the headwaters of no fewer than four great rivers. The garden in Kashan, emphasizing the pleasures of rationality and control, directed its precious water into straight, narrow channels and a perfectly square pool lined with turquoise tiles. The water also supplied an attached historic hammam, or bathhouse, where a nationalist hero in the nineteenth century was killed by an assassin (another word English has borrowed from Persian).

A twinge of disappointment is built into the fulfillment of any desire that has been deferred for too long, so it is not surprising that my experience of paradise, in the form of the Bagh-e Fin, was a slight letdown. So too Shiraz, the fabled city of nightingales and wine, turned out to have more than its share of traffic and dreary 1970s architecture—and, of course, enormous photographs of the Ayatollah Khomeini and the omnipresent martyrs.

The grand exception to the melancholy that lingered over much of my visit after I left Tehran, and the true fulfillment of my old dream of Iran, was Isfahan. There too, along with a striking absence of tourism, there were the usual grim icons of the Islamic Republic. But the city was largely spared modern architectural depredations. The broad Zayandeh River is spanned by majestic ancient bridges that traditionally featured teahouses. The zealous guardians of morality, fearing that the spaces encouraged the young to flirt with one another, recently shut the teahouses down, but even without them the bridges were full of happy life. And the mosques and gardens and public squares were fantastically beautiful.

Near the close of a long day of sightseeing, Hassan proposed to take me to a church. I thanked him but said that I would be willing to forgo that visit. I was Jewish, and what I would love to see, I told him, was the synagogue that was indicated on my map. He seemed taken aback for a moment, but he quickly recovered and said that in Mashad, the city in which he was raised, he once knew a Jewish family, but they had moved away. We went in search of the synagogue, which seemed from the map to be located on a street adjacent to the city’s labyrinthine covered bazaar, but we did not find it. Hassan began to ask shopkeepers and passersby who looked at us quizzically but were unable to help. As we ventured further into a quiet neighborhood—the bazaar had given way to narrow lanes—he knocked on doors and shouted the question up to shuttered windows. Finally, an old lady said that there had once been Jews who had lived in that area, but they were all gone now. She did not know what had happened to the synagogue.

I do not imagine that there was much I would have seen, certainly nothing comparable to the palaces and madrasas, the hammams and the mosques around me. The most beautiful of all was the mosque of Sheikh Lotfollah, on one side of the immense central square where Persian nobles once played polo. The mosque’s dome is surprisingly off-center from its elaborate entrance portal, so that you reach the sanctuary by passing through a narrow, winding hallway. I gazed in astonishment at the swirling color of the glazed tiles, their turquoise, green, and ochre drawn into magical patterns of intertwining foliage, elegant arabesques, and kaleidoscopic lozenges. Each of the niches formed by the supporting arches was surrounded by cobalt-blue tiles bearing Koranic verses in the Arabic script that seems to me the most beautiful of all written languages.

I looked up into the dome where I saw suspended from its highest point a magnificent, shimmering gold chandelier. It was only slowly that I realized that there was no chandelier there at all; the gold tiles in the dome were picking up and reflecting the natural light from the sixteen windows that circled its base. For once there was another tourist in the space with me, and I walked over to share my sense of wonderment at what we were witnessing. He was a young, very tall, very thin Dutchman, and we chatted while we both tried to capture the magical effect with our cameras. He had, he told me, quit his job in a bank in Amsterdam and had biked to Iran all the way from Holland. He hoped, he said, to make it to Pakistan. This was a level of adventurousness far beyond anything I had imagined for myself in the 1960s, and I was happy to bequeath to him, so much braver or more reckless than I, the last vestiges of the dream of an honest, free, and wide-open world that I had once cherished and that Shakespeare continues to embody. □

*This article will appear in a different form in the forthcoming Shakespeare in Our Time: A Shakespeare Association of America Collection, edited by Dympha Callaghan and Suzanne Gossett (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare Publishing Plc, 2016).*

### HIRAM BUTLER GALLERY



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Detail of the Sydney Opera House. Photo by Jack Atley, courtesy of Sydney Opera House Trust. Text and design ©2015 J. Paul Getty Trust.



# The Artist of Sex and Death

Ian Buruma

## Egon Schiele: Portraits

an exhibition at the  
Neue Galerie, New York City,  
October 9, 2014–April 20, 2015.  
Catalog of the exhibition  
edited by Alessandra Comini.  
Neue Galerie/Prestel, 295 pp., \$65.00

Standing in front of Egon Schiele's full-length portrait of Edith—one of the most striking pictures at the Neue Galerie's exhibition of Schiele portraits—I thought what a peculiar tribute this was to the young woman he had just married (see illustration on page 22). He had begun a courtship of Edith (as well as her sister Adele) in the spring of 1914, and she became Schiele's wife, much against the wishes of her family, in 1915. The painting was done the same year. (Another fine portrait in sombre autumn colors, displayed in the same show, of Edith's father, Johann Harms, a retired railway man, slumped in his chair, asleep perhaps, suggests that just one year later Schiele may have been forgiven for taking Edith away from her family.)

There she is, a gawky red-haired figure squeezed into a milky background, her slim hands clutching a multicolored striped dress, made by herself out of curtain material, her white shoes turned slightly inward, her wide blue eyes peering with childlike innocence from a pale-skinned face. The impression is of a doll-like creature, stiff, timid, not entirely in control of her own limbs. The inexperienced, ultra-respectable Edith Harms, from a Protestant family, would seem to have been an odd companion to a nominally Catholic artist famous (indeed notorious) for his scandalously erotic pictures, many of them of his mistress and model, the free-spirited Wally Neuzil.

In the Neue Galerie show, the portrait of Edith hangs in the same room as the erotic works, such as the watercolor and pencil drawing of a young girl opening up her vagina like the petals of a rose (*Observed in a Dream*, 1911), or Wally looking at the viewer anything but innocently with her legs drawn up, as though waiting to be penetrated (*Wally in Red Blouse with Raised Knees*, 1913; see illustration on page 22).

Wally had been living with Schiele in Neulengbach, a small town in Lower Austria, in 1912, when he was arrested for kidnapping, rape, and public immorality. The first two charges were dropped for lack of evidence. But Schiele's erotic drawings of young girls were enough to convict him on the third count and send him to prison for twenty-four days. Wally loyally stuck with him, as his mistress. Despite all his bohemian airs, Schiele did not regard her as a suitable wife. Himself the son of a humble stationmaster (who had been driven mad by syphilis at an early age), Schiele wanted to combine his artistic explorations of dark sexuality with the bourgeois comforts of settled domesticity. For this he needed a bourgeois wife.

Edith and Adele Harms lived opposite Schiele's studio in Vienna. He attracted their attention by making faces and holding up pictures from his window. And he would take them on walks, reassuring them, and their anxious mother, of his honorable in-



Egon Schiele: Self-Portrait with Arm Twisted Above Head, 1910

tentions by bringing the ever-trusting Wally along with him. He wasn't sure, at first, who would make a better wife, Edith or Adele. In the end, he chose Edith. Adele had to settle for taking her clothes off for some of her brother-in-law's drawings.

Ideally, Schiele would have liked his liaison with Wally to continue after his marriage to Edith, in a kind of ménage à trois (at least during the holidays), but Edith insisted that Wally should disappear from their lives, which she did with surprisingly good grace. How painful



Egon Schiele: Death and the Maiden, 1915

Private Collection

this was to both of them is revealed in Schiele's 1915 oil painting *Death and the Maiden*: the man, resembling the artist, is holding on to the half-dressed woman, whose hands are clasped behind his back as though for the last time. The sepulchral brownish colors and shroudlike bed sheets set the tone. Both people look absolutely miserable.

The conventional opinion about Schiele's 1915 portrait of Edith is that it betrays his romantic disappointment. His wife may have represented domestic calm, a point of stability in respectable Viennese society, and so forth, but she wasn't sexy like Wally. It is true that even in the erotic pictures of Edith, and there are a few, such as one with splayed legs (*Seated Semi-Nude*, 1916), or one embracing her husband from behind, while he places his hand on his genitals (*Embrace I*, 1915), she looks demure, indeed a little embarrassed.

There is none of Wally's sexual knowingness in the pictures of Edith. Nor, on first sight, are they haunted by intimations of death. There is something deliberately morbid about many of Schiele's pictures: the almost skeletal nudes, with their blood-red elbows and fingers, prefiguring death, even as they engage in sexual acts. In his famous watercolor *Self-Portrait in Black Cloak, Masturbating* (1911), the artist looks cadaverous, more dead than alive. Schiele was the master painter of decadence, of the dying process of living individuals, as well as of Viennese culture on the precipice of a catastrophic war and the dissolution of a great empire.

So how does the apparently wholesome innocence of Edith's portrait fit into Schiele's oeuvre? Is it just an expression of conjugal assurance and erotic disappointment? Or is there more to it? I think there is. Looked at more closely, the picture still reveals Schiele's fascination with the very Viennese entanglement of sex and death.

Many of Schiele's human figures, not just Edith, have a puppetlike quality, including nude drawings of himself. In *Self-Portrait with Arm Twisted Above Head* (1910), shown at the Neue Galerie, Schiele is contorted like a marionette. In one of his most striking oil paintings, hanging next to the portrait of Edith, we see the artist in a postcoital moment with his mistress. Schiele, looking malevolent, like Nosferatu rising from his coffin, hovers over Wally, who is on hands and knees, drained, spent, like an exhausted dancer.

The puppet can represent many things. One of these is the human body as something to be manipulated at will. Edith's helplessness, as shown in her portrait, could well have been part of her erotic attraction for Schiele: the shy bourgeoisie who could be shaped by the older, more experienced artist. If Schiele was fascinated by decay, he also had an exalted view of artistic power, of the artist as a puppet master, the artist as God.

Schiele made several paintings of a mother carrying a baby in her womb, bursting to come out into the light. One, painted on wood, is entitled *Dead Mother* (1910). Birth, in this picture,

Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, Vienna





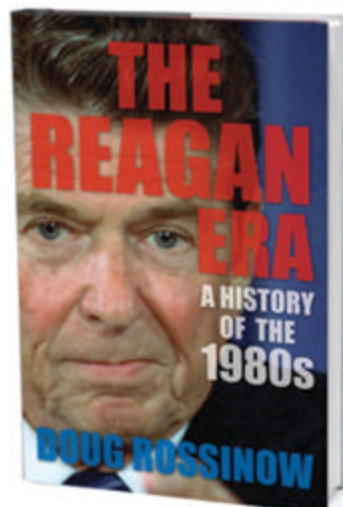
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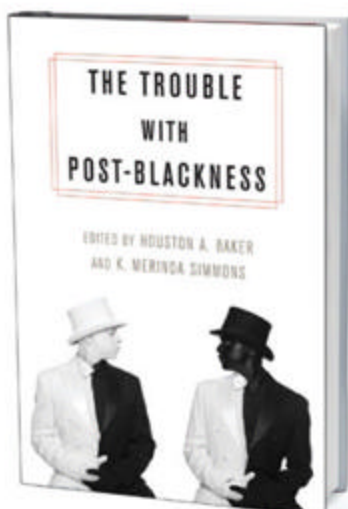
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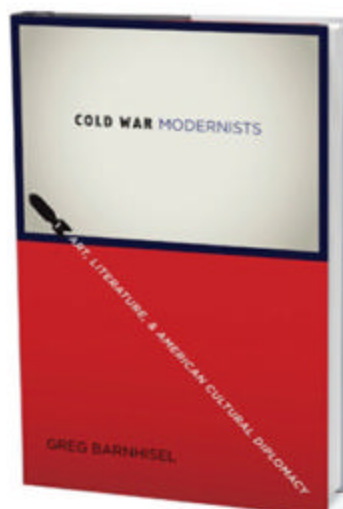


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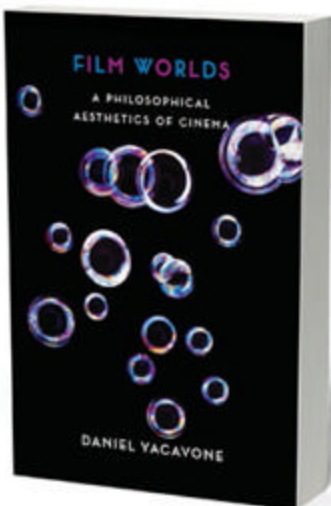
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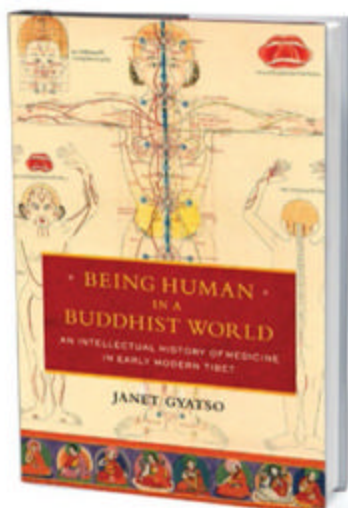
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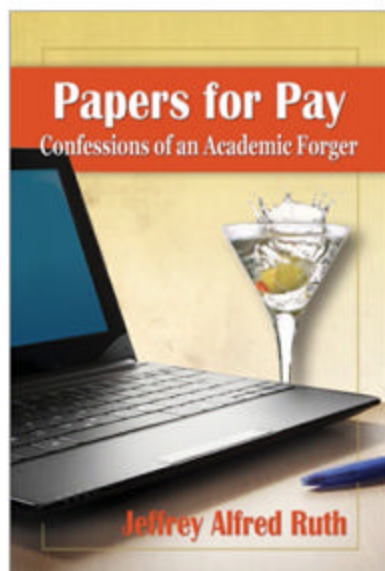
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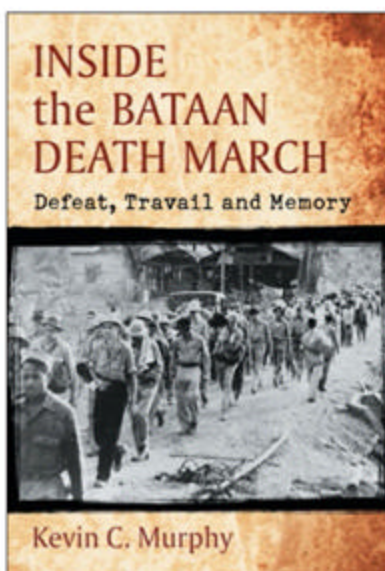
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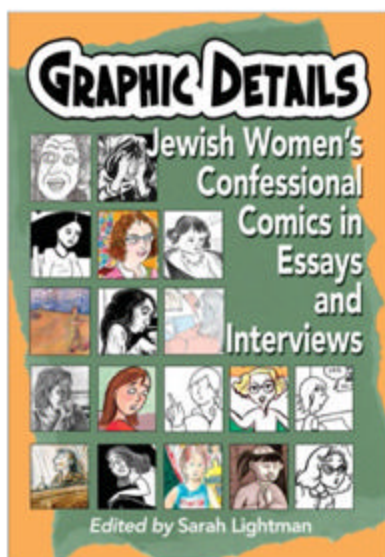




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appears to be emerging straight from death. He gave his second *Dead Mother* painting, done in 1911, the subtitle *The Birth of Genius*. Schiele had a troubled, and often resentful, relationship with his own mother. Her greatest achievement, he often implied, was to have given birth to a great artist. In a letter to her, he asked: "How great, then, must your joy be—to have given birth to me?"\*

He might have shared the deeply Romantic notion of the artist as an almost sacred outsider with his more light-hearted mentor Gustav Klimt. In 1912, Schiele did a large painting called *The Hermits* of himself and Klimt as martyred saints, Schiele with a crown of thorns wrapped around his tormented face. In their dark robes, they hang together in a kind of *danse macabre*, still alive but playing with the forces of death.

In many cultures, the sacred outsider is sexually ambiguous, neither man nor woman, like an angel. There are hints of this in Schiele's pictures too. His *Self-Portrait in Black Cloak, Masturbating* shows the artist hiding his testicles with both hands held in the shape of a vagina. There are also some fine portraits, in oil and drawings, of Erich Lederer, the adolescent son of one of Schiele's patrons. They are celebrations of his androgyny, the beauty of a different kind of outsider. The boy is fully alive, yet his face has the pallor of death.

As anyone who has seen good puppet theater—or any child—knows, dolls can look more alive than living beings. One of the most sophisticated forms of puppet theater is the Japanese Bunraku. Even though the puppeteers, dressed in dark kimonos, are on stage, and the words spoken by the dolls come from the storytellers sitting on the side, the puppets seem uncannily alive. So much so that Kabuki theater, which evolved from Bunraku, developed a style in which the living actors mimic the stylized movements of puppets. Since Schiele was a passionate admirer of Japanese prints (and collector; his Japanese erotica were famous in Vienna), there may well be a link between his art and Japanese theatrical conventions.

There are other precedents to Schiele's sexual puppeteering. Pygmalion was the sculptor in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* who fell in love with his own creation of a beautiful woman made out of ivory. After he made an offering to Aphrodite, the sculpture

\*Reinhard Steiner, *Egon Schiele, 1890–1918: The Midnight Soul of the Artist* (Taschen, 1991), p. 65.



Egon Schiele: Portrait of the Artist's Wife, Standing (Edith Schiele in a Striped Dress), 1915

came to life, as Pygmalion had wished. They married and had a son.

Nearer Schiele's time, we have E.T.A. Hoffmann's story of the student Nathanael who falls in love with Olympia, a mechanical wooden doll. (Jacques Offenbach dramatized this story in his opera *Tales of Hoffmann*.) She is his ideal woman, more devoted to him than any living creature could be. In Nathanael's words, Olympia is a "profound spirit, reflecting my whole existence!" In another Hoffmann tale, "Automata," a man expresses disgust for mechanical creatures, which he calls "those true statues of a living death or a dead life."



Egon Schiele: Wally in Red Blouse with Raised Knees, 1913

There is no reason to think that Schiele meant his portrait of Edith to be an expression of living death. Nor is she simply depicted as a reflection of his own genius, an updated sculpture of Pygmalion. She is very much a creature of flesh and blood. But then the doll-like quality about figures in Schiele's paintings does not mean the absence of life.

In 1915, the year he married Edith, Schiele began painting *Mother and Two Children III*. The mother, as in his earlier treatments of this theme, looks dead or close to death, her eyes hollow and unseeing in a sickly gray face. The two children, both modeled after Schiele's own nephew, Toni, have the rosy cheeks and healthy tints of rude health. They are dressed, like Edith, in bright multicolored clothes. And yet, again like Edith, they have the stiffness of marionettes, waiting to be animated by a master.

Schiele's art with its deep sensitivity to death and decay, even in a loving portrait of a newly wed wife, is far more generous than some of his critics allow. What most of his pictures, including the most erotic ones, show is an awareness of human vulnerability.

Again, there is a parallel with Japanese aesthetics, not so much in his cherished woodblock prints but in the plays and drawings with their sense of impermanence, the fleetingness of life, the poetry of imminent extinction.

Schiele's own fate, and that of his models, can be seen as a tragic illustration of his artistic sensibility. In 1917, two years after they broke up, Wally died of scarlet fever, while working as a war nurse in Dalmatia. One year later, Edith, pregnant with Schiele's child, died of Spanish influenza, the epidemic that killed more people than all the dead in World War I. A few days after Edith's death, Schiele fell ill and died of the same disease, at the age of twenty-eight. □

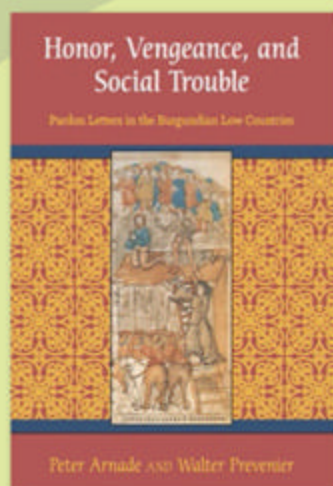
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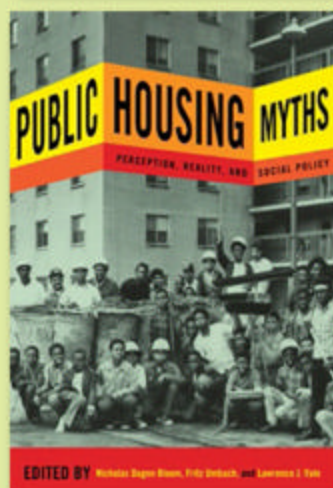


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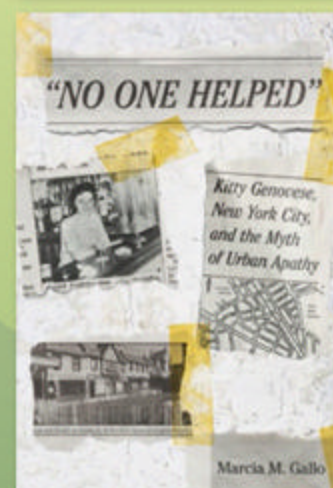


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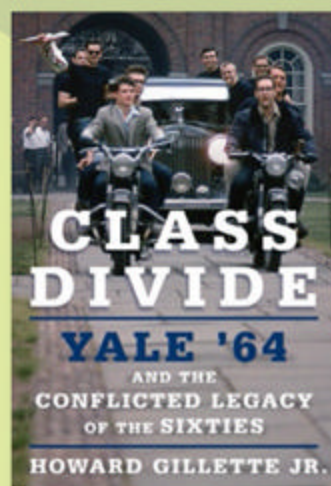


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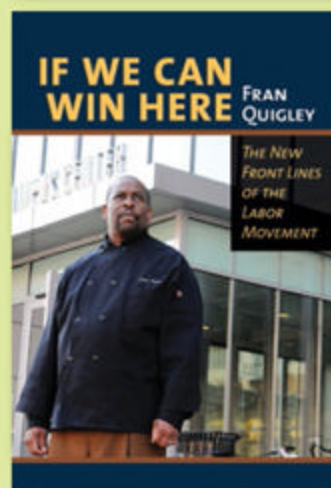


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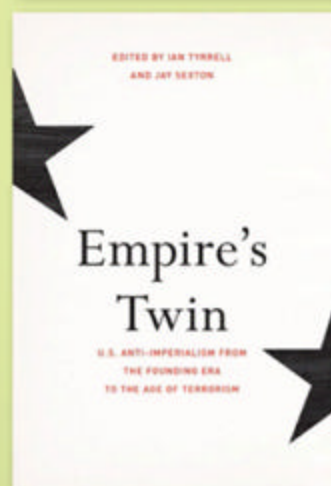
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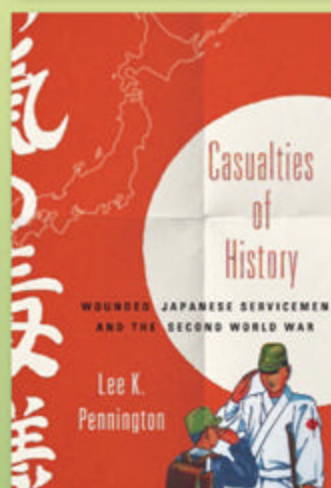
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# How Robots & Algorithms Are Taking Over

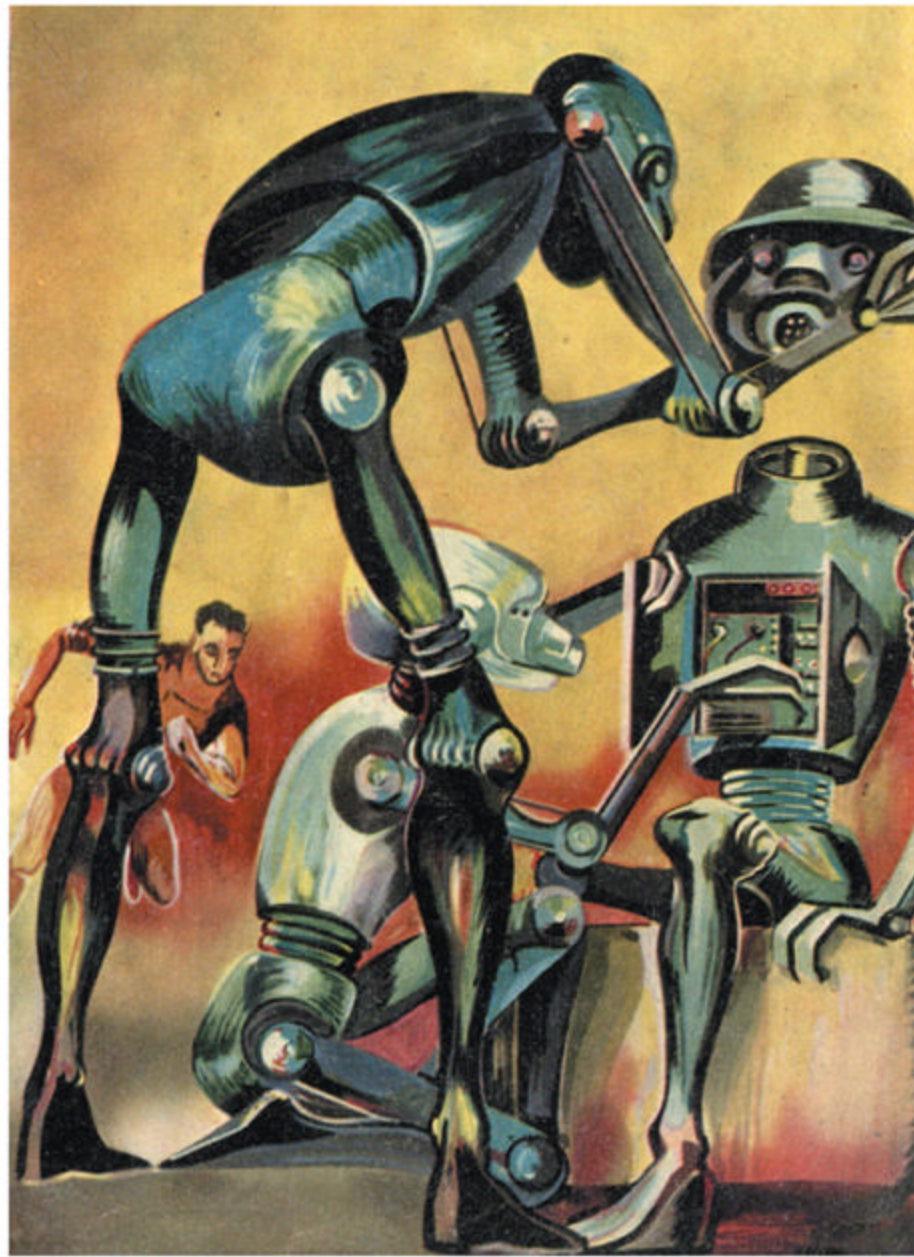
Sue Halpern

**The Glass Cage:**  
**Automation and Us**  
by Nicholas Carr.  
Norton, 276 pp., \$26.95

In September 2013, about a year before Nicholas Carr published *The Glass Cage: Automation and Us*, his chastening meditation on the human future, a pair of Oxford researchers issued a report predicting that nearly half of all jobs in the United States could be lost to machines within the next twenty years. The researchers, Carl Benedikt Frey and Michael Osborne, looked at seven hundred kinds of work and found that among those occupations, the most susceptible to automation were loan officers, receptionists, paralegals, store clerks, taxi drivers, and security guards. Even computer programmers, the people writing the algorithms that are taking on these tasks, will not be immune. By Frey and Osborne's calculations, there is about a 50 percent chance that programming, too, will be outsourced to machines within the next two decades.

In fact, this is already happening, in part because programmers increasingly rely on "self-correcting" code—that is, code that debugs and rewrites itself—and in part because they are creating machines that are able to learn on the job. While these machines cannot think, per se, they can process phenomenal amounts of data with ever-increasing speed and use what they have learned to perform such functions as medical diagnosis, navigation, and translation, among many others. Add to these self-repairing robots that are able to negotiate hostile environments like radioactive power plants and collapsed mines and then fix themselves without human intercession when the need arises. The most recent iteration of these robots has been designed by the robots themselves, suggesting that in the future even roboticists may find themselves out of work.

The term for what happens when human workers are replaced by machines was coined by John Maynard Keynes in 1930 in the essay "Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren." He called it "technological unemployment." At the time, Keynes considered technical unemployment a transitory condition, "a temporary phase of maladjustment" brought on by "our discovery of means of economizing the use of labour outrunning the pace at which we can find new uses for labour." In the United States, for example, the mechanization of the railways around the time Keynes was writing his essay put nearly half a million people out of work. Similarly, rotary phones were making switchboard operators obsolete, while mechanical harvesters, plows, and combines were replacing traditional farmworkers, just as the first steam-engine tractors had replaced horses and oxen less than a century before. Machine efficiency was becoming so great that President Roosevelt, in 1935, told the nation that the economy might never be able to reabsorb all the workers who were being displaced. The more sanguine *New York Times* editorial board then accused the president of



Artwork for the cover of a 1959 issue of the French science fiction magazine *Galaxie*

falling prey to the "calamity prophets."

In retrospect, it certainly looked as if he had. Unemployment, which was at nearly 24 percent in 1932, dropped to less than 5 percent a decade later. This was a pattern that would reassert itself throughout the twentieth century: the economy would tank, automation would be identified as one of the main culprits, commentators would suggest that jobs were not coming back, and then the economy would rebound and with it employment, and all that nervous chatter about machines taking over would fade away.

When the economy faltered in 1958, and then again in 1961, for instance, what was being called the "automation problem" was taken up by Congress, which passed the Manpower Development and Training Act. In his State of the Union Address of 1962, President Kennedy explained that this law was meant "to stop the waste of able-bodied men and women who want to work, but whose only skill has been replaced by a machine, moved with a mill, or shut down with a mine." Two years later, President Johnson convened a National Commission on Technology, Automation, and Economic Progress to assess the economic effects of automation and technological change. But then a funny thing happened. By the time the commission issued its report in 1966, the economy was approaching full employment. Concern about

machines supplanting workers abated. The commission was disbanded.

That fear, though, was dormant, not gone. A *Time* magazine cover from 1980 titled "The Robot Revolution" shows a tentacled automaton strangling human workers. An essay three years later by an MIT economist named Harley Shaiken begins:

As more and more attention is focused on economic recovery, for 11 million people the grim reality is continued unemployment. Against this backdrop the central issue raised by rampant and pervasive technological change is not simply how many people may be displaced in the coming decade but how many who are currently unemployed will never return to the job.

Unemployment, which was approaching 10 percent at the time, then fell by half at decade's end, and once more the automation problem receded.

Yet there it was again, on the heels of the economic collapse of 2008. An investigation by the Associated Press in 2013 put it this way:

Five years after the start of the Great Recession, the toll is terrifyingly clear: Millions of middle-

class jobs have been lost in developed countries the world over.

And the situation is even worse than it appears.

Most of the jobs will never return, and millions more are likely to vanish as well, say experts who study the labor market....

They're being obliterated by technology.

Year after year, the software that runs computers and an array of other machines and devices becomes more sophisticated and powerful and capable of doing more efficiently tasks that humans have always done. For decades, science fiction warned of a future when we would be architects of our own obsolescence, replaced by our machines; an Associated Press analysis finds that the future has arrived.

Here is what that future—which is to say now—looks like: banking, logistics, surgery, and medical recordkeeping are just a few of the occupations that have already been given over to machines. Manufacturing, which has long been hospitable to mechanization and automation, is becoming more so as the cost of industrial robots drops, especially in relation to the cost of human labor. According to a new study by the Boston Consulting Group, currently the expectation is that machines, which now account for 10 percent of all manufacturing tasks, are likely to perform about 25 percent of them by 2025. (To understand the economics of this transition, one need only consider the American automotive industry, where a human spot welder costs about \$25 an hour and a robotic one costs \$8. The robot is faster and more accurate, too.) The Boston group expects most of the growth in automation to be concentrated in transportation equipment, computer and electronic products, electrical equipment, and machinery.

Meanwhile, algorithms are writing most corporate reports, analyzing intelligence data for the NSA and CIA, reading mammograms, grading tests, and sniffing out plagiarism. Computers fly planes—Nicholas Carr points out that the average airline pilot is now at the helm of an airplane for about three minutes per flight—and they compose music and pick which pop songs should be recorded based on which chord progressions and riffs were hits in the past. Computers pursue drug development—a robot in the UK named Eve may have just found a new compound to treat malaria—and fill pharmacy vials.

Xerox uses computers—not people—to select which applicants to hire for its call centers. The retail giant Amazon "employs" 15,000 warehouse robots to pull items off the shelf and pack boxes. The self-driving car is being road-tested. A number of hotels are staffed by robotic desk clerks and cleaned by robotic chambermaids. Airports are instituting robotic valet parking. Cynthia Breazeal, the director of MIT's personal robots group, raised \$1 million in six days on the crowd-funding site Indiegogo, and then \$25 million in venture capital funding,



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Nina Katchadourian

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Images: The Office for Creative Research and Elevator Repair Service. *Shuffle* at the Prague Quadrennial. 2011; Nina Katchadourian. *Sugar Fox* from "Seat Assignment." 2010 and ongoing. Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery; Michael Rakowitz. *Enemy Kitchen*. 2004 and ongoing



to bring Jibo, “the world’s first social robot,” to market.

What is a social robot? In the words of John Markoff of *The New York Times*, “it’s a robot with a little humanity.” It will tell your child bedtime stories, order takeout when you don’t feel like cooking, know you prefer Coke over Pepsi, and snap photos of important life events so you don’t have to step out of the picture. At the other end of the spectrum, machine guns, which automated killing in the nineteenth century, are being supplanted by Lethal Autonomous Robots (LARs) that can operate without human intervention. (By contrast, drones, which fly without an onboard pilot, still require a person at the controls.) All this—and unemployment is now below 6 percent.

Gross unemployment statistics, of course, can be deceptive. They don’t take into account people who have given up looking for work, or people who are underemployed, or those who have had to take pay cuts after losing higher-paying jobs. And they don’t reflect where the jobs are, or what sectors they represent, and which age cohorts are finding employment and which are not. And so while the pattern looks familiar, the worry is that this time around, machines really will undermine the labor force. As former Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers wrote in *The Wall Street Journal* last July:

The economic challenge of the future will not be *producing* enough. It will be providing enough *good jobs*.... Today...there are more sectors losing jobs than creating jobs. And the general-purpose aspect of software technology means that even the industries and jobs that it creates are not forever.

To be clear, there are physical robots like Jibo and the machines that assemble our cars, and there are virtual robots, which are the algorithms that undergird the computers that perform countless daily tasks, from driving those cars, to Google searches, to online banking. Both are avatars of automation, and both are altering the nature of work, taking on not only repetitive physical jobs, but intellectual and heretofore exclusively human ones as well. And while both are defining features of what has been called “the second machine age,” what really distinguishes this moment is the speed at which technology is changing and changing society with it. If the “calamity prophets” are finally right, and this time the machines really will win out, this is why. It’s not just that computers seem to be infiltrating every aspect of our lives, it’s that they *have* infiltrated them and *are* infiltrating them with breathless rapidity. It’s not just that life *seems* to have sped up, it’s that it has. And that speed, and that infiltration, appear to have a life of their own.

Just as computer hardware follows Moore’s Law, which says that computing power doubles every eighteen months, so too does computer capacity and functionality. Consider, for instance, the process of legal discovery. As Carr describes it,

computers can [now] parse thousands of pages of digitized documents in seconds. Using e-discovery

software with language-analysis algorithms, the machines not only spot relevant words and phrases but also discern chains of events, relationships among people, and even personal emotions and motivations. A single computer can take over the work of dozens of well-paid professionals.

Or take the autonomous automobile. It can sense all the vehicles around it, respond to traffic controls and sudden movements, apply the brakes as needed, know when the tires need air, signal a turn, and never get a speeding ticket. Volvo predicts that by 2020 its vehicles will be “crash-free,” but even now there are cars that can park themselves with great precision.

The goal of automating automobile parking, and of automating driving itself, is no different than the goal of automating a factory, or pharmaceutical discovery, or surgery: it’s to rationalize the process, making it more efficient, productive, and cost-effective. What this means is that automation is always going to be more convenient than what came before it—for someone. And while it’s often pitched as being most convenient for the end user—the patient on the operating table, say, or the Amazon shopper, or the Google searcher, in fact the rewards of convenience flow most directly to those who own the automated system (Jeff Bezos, for example, not the Amazon Prime member).

Since replacing human labor with machine labor is not simply the collateral damage of automation but, rather, the point of it, whenever the workforce is subject to automation, technological unemployment, whether short- or long-lived, must follow. The MIT economists Eric Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee, who are champions of automation, state this unambiguously when they write:

Even the most beneficial developments have unpleasant consequences that must be managed.... Technological progress is going to leave behind some people, perhaps even a lot of people, as it races ahead.<sup>1</sup>

Flip this statement around, and what Brynjolfsson and McAfee are also saying is that while technological progress is going to force many people to submit to tightly monitored control of their movements, with their productivity clearly measured, that progress is also going to benefit perhaps just a few as it races ahead. And that, it appears, is what is happening. (Of the fifteen wealthiest Americans, six own digital technology companies, the oldest of which, Microsoft, has been in existence only since 1975. Six others are members of a single family, the Waltons, whose vast retail empire, with its notoriously low wages, has meant that people are much cheaper and more expendable

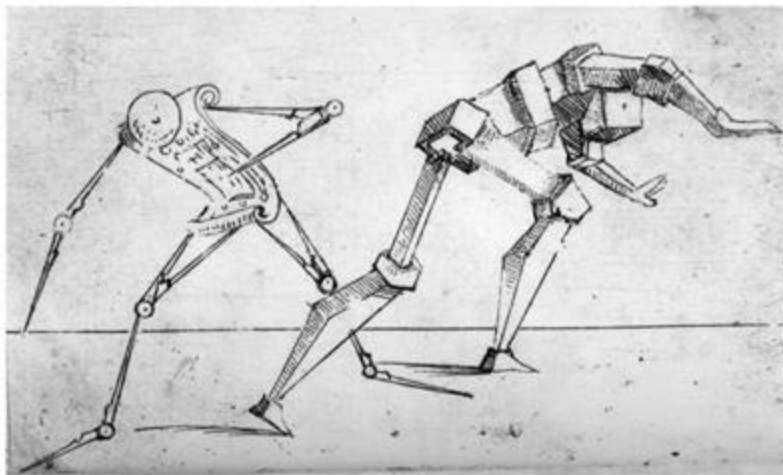
<sup>1</sup>*The Second Machine Age: Work, Progress, and Prosperity in a Time of Brilliant Technologies* (Norton, 2014), pp. 10–11.

than warehouse robots. Still, Walmart has benefited from an automated point-of-sale system that enables its owners to know precisely what is selling where and when, which in turn allows them to avoid stocking slow-moving items and to tie up less money than the competitors in inventory.)

As Paul Krugman wrote a couple of years ago in *The New York Times*:

Smart machines may make higher GDP possible, but they will also reduce the demand for people—including smart people. So we could be looking at a society that grows ever richer, but in which all the gains in wealth accrue to whoever owns the robots.

In the United States, real wages have been stagnant for the past four decades, while corporate profits have soared. As of last year, 16 percent of men be-



‘Bizarre Figures’; etching by Giovanni Battista Bracelli, 1624

tween eighteen and fifty-four and 30 percent of women in the same age group were not working, and more than a third of those who were unemployed attributed their joblessness to technology. As *The Economist* reported in early 2014:

Recent research suggests that... substituting capital for labor through automation is increasingly attractive; as a result owners of capital have captured ever more of the world’s income since the 1980s, while the share going to labor has fallen.

There is a certain school of thought, championed primarily by those such as Google’s Larry Page, who stand to make a lot of money from the ongoing digitization and automation of just about everything, that the elimination of jobs concurrent with a rise in productivity will lead to a leisure class freed from work. Leaving aside questions about how these lucky folks will house and feed themselves, the belief that most people would like nothing more than to be able to spend all day in their pajamas watching TV—which turns out to be what many “nonemployed” men do—sorely misconstrues the value of work, even work that might appear to an outsider to be less than fulfilling. Stated simply: work confers identity. When Dublin City University professor Michael Doherty surveyed Irish workers, including those who stocked grocery shelves and drove city buses, to find out if work continues to be “a significant locus of personal identity,” even at a time when employment itself is less secure, he concluded that “the findings

of this research can be summed up in the succinct phrase: ‘work matters.’”<sup>2</sup>

How much it matters may not be quantifiable, but in an essay in *The New York Times*, Dean Baker, the co-director of the Center for Economic and Policy Research, noted that there was

a 50 to 100 percent increase in death rates for older male workers in the years immediately following a job loss, if they previously had been consistently employed.

One reason was suggested in a study by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the author of *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990), who found, Carr reports, that “people were happier, felt more fulfilled by what they were doing, while they were at work than during their leisure hours.”

Even where automation does not eliminate jobs, it often changes the nature of work. Carr makes a convincing case for the ways in which automation dulls the brain, removing the need to pay attention or master complicated routines or think creatively and react quickly. Those airline pilots who now are at the controls for less than three minutes find themselves spending most of their flight time staring at computer screens while automated systems do the actual flying. As a consequence, their overreliance on automation,

and on a tendency to trust computer data even in the face of contradictory physical evidence, can be dangerous. Carr cites a study by Matthew Ebbatson, a human factors researcher, that

found a direct correlation between a pilot’s aptitude at the controls and the amount of time the pilot had spent flying without the aid of automation.... The analysis indicated that “manual flying skills decay quite rapidly towards the fringes of ‘tolerable’ performance without relatively frequent practice.”

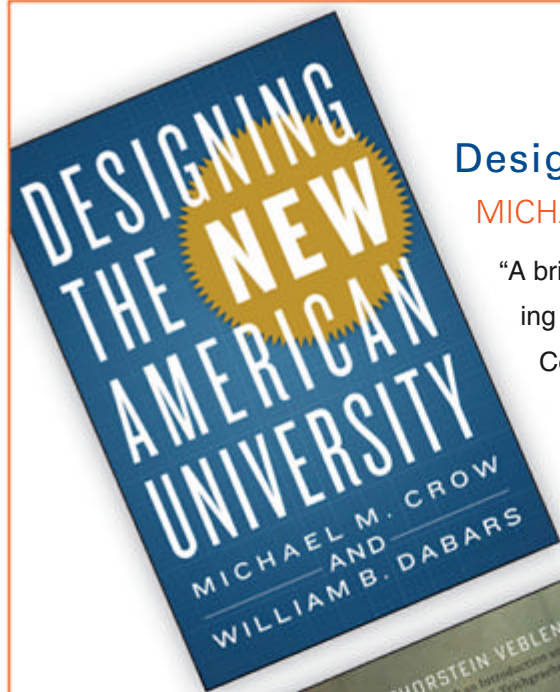
Similarly, an FAA report on cockpit automation released in 2013 found that over half of all airplane accidents were the result of the mental autopilot brought on by actual autopilot.

If aviation is a less convincing case, since the overall result of automation has been to make flying safer, consider a more mundane and ubiquitous activity, Internet searches using Google. According to Carr, relying on the Internet for facts and figures is making us mindless sloths. He points to a study in *Science* that demonstrates that the wealth of information readily available on the Internet disinclines users from remembering what they’ve found out. He also cites an interview with Amit Singhal, Google’s lead search engineer, who states that “the more accurate the machine gets [at predicting search terms], the lazier the questions become.”

A corollary to all this intellectual laziness and dullness is what Carr calls

<sup>2</sup>Michael Doherty, “When the Working Day Is Through: The End of Work As Identity?” *Work, Employment and Society*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (March 2009).





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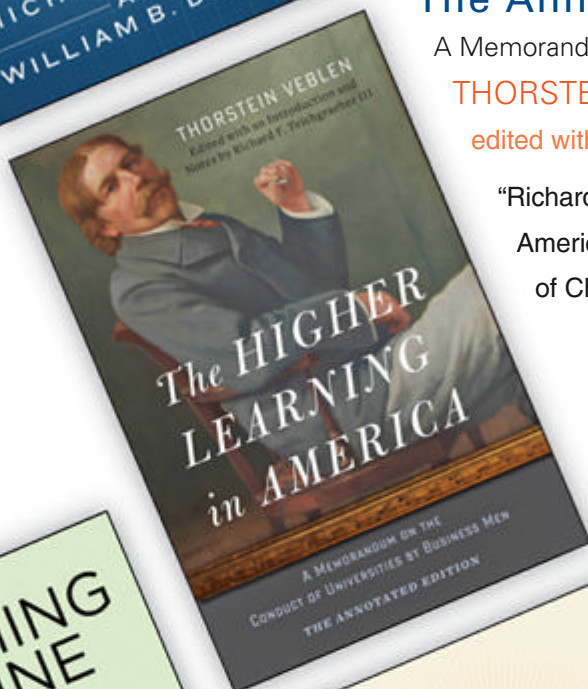
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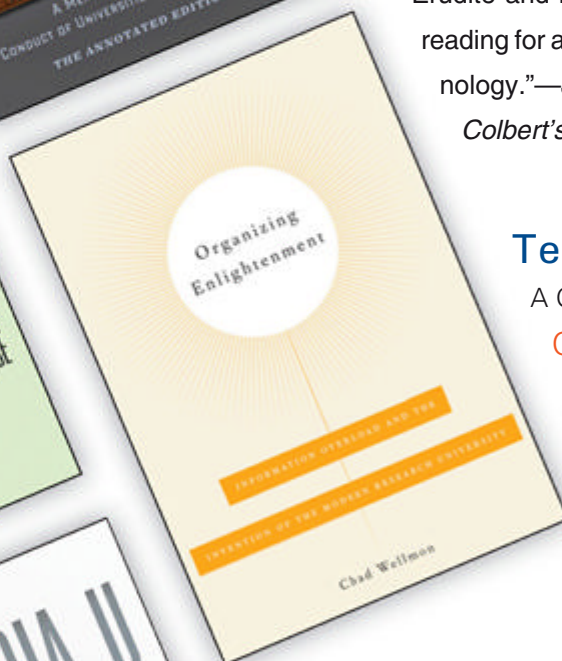
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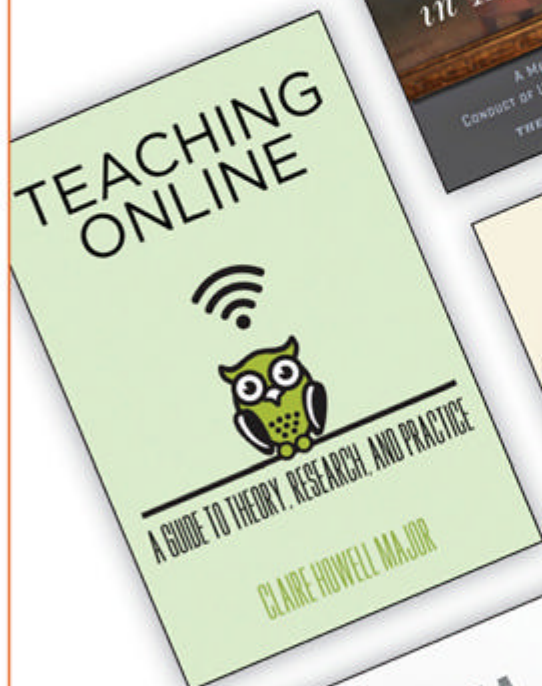
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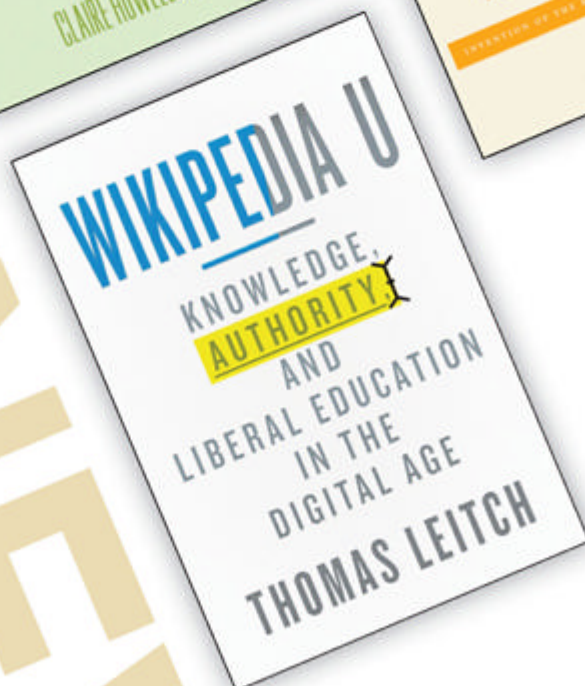
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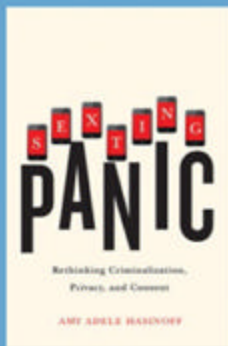
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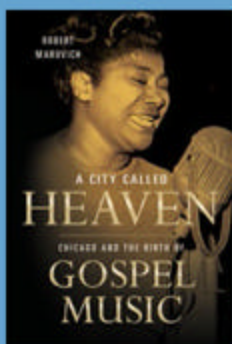
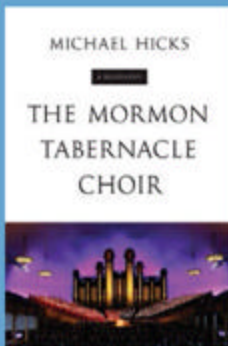
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"deskilling"—the loss of abilities and proficiencies as more and more authority is handed over to machines. Doctors who cede authority to machines to read X-rays and make diagnoses, architects who rely increasingly on computer-assisted design (CAD) programs, marketers who place ads based on algorithms, traders who no longer trade—all suffer a diminution of the expertise that comes with experience, or they never gain that experience in the first place. As Carr sees it:

As more skills are built into the machine, it assumes more control over the work, and the worker's opportunity to engage in and develop deeper talents, such as those involved in interpretation and judgment, dwindles. When automation reaches its highest level, when it takes command of the job, the worker, skillwise, has nowhere to go but down.

Conversely, machines have nowhere to go but up. In Carr's estimation, "as we grow more reliant on applications and algorithms, we become less capable of acting without their aid.... That makes the software more indispensable still. Automation breeds automation."

But since automation also produces quicker drug development, safer highways, more accurate medical diagnoses, cheaper material goods, and greater energy efficiency, to name just a few of its obvious benefits, there have been few cautionary voices like Nicholas Carr's urging us to take stock, especially, of the effects of automation on our very humanness—what makes us who we are as individuals—and on our humanity—what makes us who we are in aggregate. Yet shortly after *The Glass Cage* was published, a group of more than one hundred Silicon Valley luminaries, led by Tesla's Elon Musk, and scientists, including the theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking, issued a call to conscience for those working on automation's holy grail, artificial intelligence, lest they, in Musk's words, "summon the demon." (In Hawking's estimation, AI could spell the end of the human race as machines evolve faster than people and overtake us.) Their letter is worth quoting at length, because it demonstrates both the hubris of those who are programming our future and the possibility that without some kind of oversight, the golem, not God, might emerge from their machines:

[Artificial intelligence] has yielded remarkable successes in various component tasks such as speech recognition, image classification, autonomous vehicles, machine translation, legged locomotion, and question-answering systems.

As capabilities in these areas and others cross the threshold from laboratory research to economically valuable technologies, a virtuous cycle takes hold whereby even small improvements in performance are worth large sums of money, prompting greater investments in research....

The potential benefits are huge, since everything that civilization has to offer is a product of human intelligence; we cannot predict

what we might achieve when this intelligence is magnified by the tools AI may provide, but the eradication of disease and poverty are not unfathomable. Because of the great potential of AI, it is important to research how to reap its benefits while avoiding potential pitfalls.

The progress in AI research makes it timely to focus research not only on making AI more capable, but also on maximizing the societal benefit.... [Until now the field of AI] has focused largely on techniques that are neutral with respect to purpose. We recommend expanded research aimed at ensuring that increasingly capable AI systems are robust and beneficial: our AI systems must do what we want them to do.

Just who is this "we" who must ensure that robots, algorithms, and intelligent machines act in the public interest? It is not, as Nicholas Carr suggests it should be, the public. Rather, according to the authors of the research plan that accompanies the letter signed by Musk, Hawking, and the others, making artificial intelligence "robust and beneficial," like making artificial intelligence itself, is an engineering problem, to be solved by engineers. To be fair, no one but those designing these systems is in a position to build in measures of control and security, but what those measures are, and what they aim to accomplish, is something else again. Indeed, their research plan, for example, looks to "maximize the economic benefits of artificial intelligence while mitigating adverse effects, which could include increased inequality and unemployment."

The priorities are clear: money first, people second. Or consider this semantic dodge: "If, as some organizations have suggested, autonomous weapons should be banned, is it possible to develop a precise definition of autonomy for this purpose...?" Moreover, the authors acknowledge that "aligning the values of powerful AI systems with our own values and preferences [may be] difficult," though this might be solved by building "systems that can learn or acquire values at run-time." However well-meaning, they fail to say what values, or whose, or to recognize that most values are not universal but, rather, culturally and socially constructed, subjective, and inherently biased.

We live in a technophilic age. We love our digital devices and all that they can do for us. We celebrate our Internet billionaires: they show us the way and deliver us to our destiny. We have President Obama, who established the National Robotics Initiative to develop the "next generation of robotics, to advance the capability and usability of such systems and artifacts, and to encourage existing and new communities to focus on innovative application areas." Even so, it is naive to believe that government is competent, let alone in a position, to control the development and deployment of robots, self-generating algorithms, and artificial intelligence. Government has too many constituent parts that have their own, sometimes competing, visions of the technological future. Business, of course, is self-interested and resists regulation. We, the people, are on our own here—though if the AI developers have their way, not for long. □



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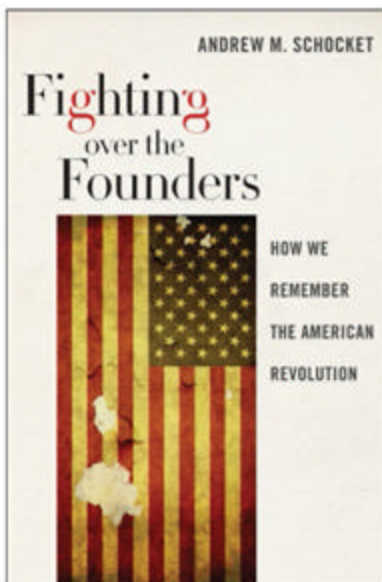
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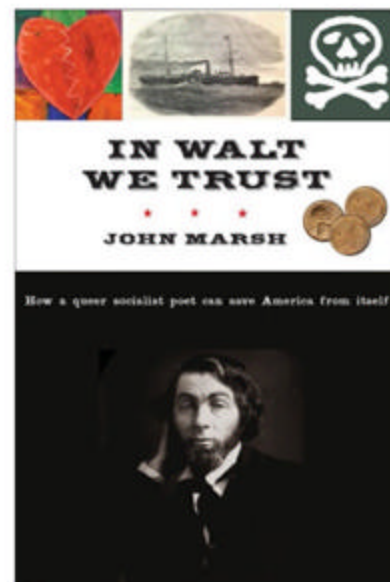
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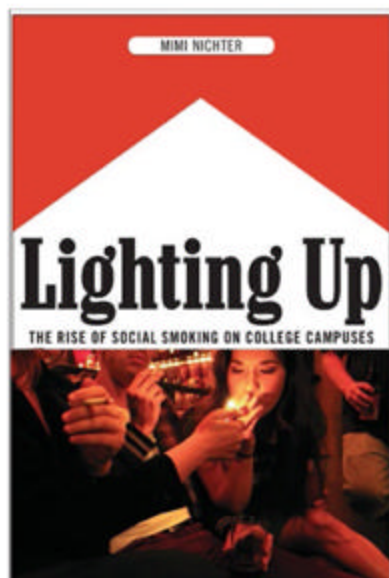
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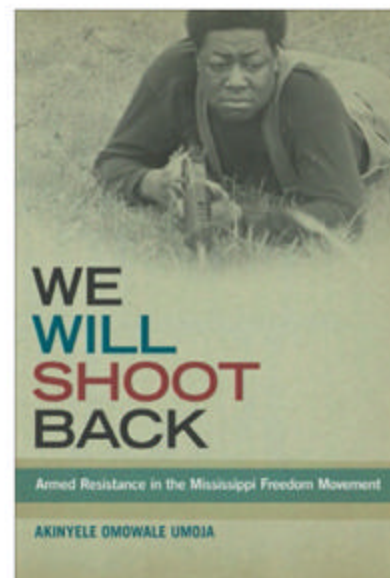
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**Sky High and the Logic of Luxury**  
an exhibition at  
the Skyscraper Museum,  
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# 1.

From the pre-Revolutionary period until World War II, tenants in New York City were uniformly given three months' notice of annual rent increases on February 1 (known as Rent Day). Many then sought cheaper deals, and when all leases expired on May 1 (called Moving Day) as many as a million residents changed houses in what amounted to a single mass migration. Lately there's been another, more specialized real estate frenzy afoot in America's largest city. Its most visible manifestations concern the world's very richest people.

Last December a long-anticipated threshold was crossed when a duplex penthouse atop the French architect Christian de Portzamparc's new One57 condominium, on Manhattan's West 57th Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues, sold for an unprecedented \$100,471,452.77. In 2014 seven more apartments at that address, built by the Extell Development Company, changed hands for between \$32 million and \$56 million each, which together accounted for more than a third of the year's two dozen biggest New York residential transactions. This January, another duplex there fetched \$90 million.

Portzamparc's tower of monetary power stands two blocks south of Central Park, at the epicenter of Manhattan's densest concentration of top-of-the-line apartment construction since Fifth and Park Avenues were built up between the two world wars. The block directly west of One57 awaits another Extell venture, Nordstrom Tower, designed by Adrian Smith (architect of the world's tallest structure, the Burj Khalifa of 2003–2010 in Dubai) and Gordon Gill. Comprising a branch of the Nordstrom's fashion retailer at street level, a hotel above the store, and condos on the uppermost stories—unobstructed park views commence at 225 feet high, hence this sequence—it will rise next to and over Henry Hardenbergh's Art Students League of 1891–1892 and become the city's tallest residential building at 1,775 feet.

Nordstrom's piggybacking was made possible by the developer's purchase of the art school's air rights—that is, the titular transfer of empty vertical space above nearby buildings never used to the full extent permissible by zoning laws. Such stratagems are an essential part of the complex legal and economic equation (what the skyscraper historian Carol Willis has termed “invisible Monopoly,” after the real estate board game) that has allowed these super-tall, super-thin towers to multiply in Midtown North, as planners and police call the neighborhood.

Although several similar towers are planned around 23rd Street near Madison Square and in Lower Manhattan, the rarefied calculus of this niche market hinges on location. Thus, even though seasoned New Yorkers have long deemed Central Park South somewhat socially marginal—during the 1980s brokers dubbed it “Mistress Row” for the many kept women with apartments there—or the province of out-of-towners who frequented its fancy hotels (the Plaza, the St. Moritz, Essex House) and touristy restaurants (Trader Vic's, Rumpelmayer's, Mickey Mantle's—which are now gone), foreign buyers consider it the golden core of the Big Apple.

On the same block as One57, SHoP Architects' proposed 111 West 57th Street will have the dubious distinction of being the world's slenderest building, thanks to the extreme contrast between its tiny 60-foot-wide base and attenuated 1,421-foot height. By way of comparison, the base-to-height ratio of Minoru Yamasaki's ill-fated twin-towered World Trade Center of 1966–1977 was 1:7; 111 West 57th Street's will be 1:23. Like both One57 and Nordstrom, 111 will have a glass curtain wall, and its full-floor apartments will all have views north to Central Park panoramas. Though a technical feat of engineering—the building is heavily weighted at its top to stabilize the thin structure in high winds—111 promises to be a simultaneously intrusive and elusive urban presence, the architectural equivalent of Chauncey Gardiner, Peter Sellers's character in Hal Ashby's film *Being There*.

The two financial prototypes for today's ultra-luxury towers were David Childs and Mustafa Kemal Abadan's Time Warner Center of 2000–2003 on Columbus Circle and Robert A.M. Stern's 15 Central Park West of 2005–2008, both a few blocks north of 57th Street. These condominiums were specifically designed to attract an emer-

gent class of plutocrats who might have difficulty buying into Manhattan's most exclusive cooperative apartment buildings, whose boards of directors, unaccountable to antidiscrimination laws, routinely blackballed Jews, blacks, gays, single women, show business performers, or anyone they considered less than respectable.

The 1990s witnessed the high-tech, telecommunications, and dot-com booms, the rise of hedge funds, the denationalization of the former Soviet Union's natural resources, and the ascendance of China's state-controlled capitalism. Together all these developments radically altered standards of private wealth worldwide. In the top bracket there were said to be only fifty or so extremely desirable apartment houses in Manhattan, symptomatic of the oddly persistent scarcity of premium housing in America's financial hub. Here was a gaping hole at the high end of the market begging to be filled.

Although major fortunes have increasingly trumped religious, racial, or social biases, some co-ops require purchasers to have liquid assets equal to many multiples of an apartment's price, which has limited sales in them to an even smaller portion of the so-called top one percent. If you buy a co-op, you buy shares in the building; if you want to leave, it is up to you to sell the shares to someone who can pass the board. Conversely, if a condominium board turns down a sale it must buy back the apartment, an effective deterrent to rejection. Thus the offspring of deposed African dictators are as welcome at condos as Social Register scions, and this ease of access has attracted shady characters who'd never get board approval at the toniest old guard citadels.

Well after 15 Central Park West was completed, high-priced resales there continued to dominate the “Big Deals” column in *The New York Times's* Sunday real estate section, which celebrates each week's largest residential property closings. Until the recent \$100 million

Limestone Jesus” because this \$950 million endeavor was seen by many to have miraculously risen from the dead after the 2008 crash killed off several other grandiose development schemes.

The stupendous financial success of 15 Central Park West has brought Stern many more apartment building commissions, including 220 Central Park South, a condominium now in progress two blocks due north of Nordstrom—so due, in fact, that the buildings' respective developers waged a costly legal battle because 220 would have blocked Nordstrom's park views. The lawsuit was settled when each party agreed to shift its tower—Stern's to the west, Smith and Gill's to the east—and Extell received \$194 million from the builder at 220 Central Park South for an adjoining Central Park South parking garage that allowed construction to proceed. The two broader elevations of Stern's building face east–west rather than north–south, and at 950 feet it will rank only tenth-highest among Manhattan skyscrapers. This late-Deco pastiche in some ways is preferable to the other new condos crowding the area, which, *faute de mieux*, indicates the generally low architectural state of New York's new housing for the super-rich.

The nascent Manhattan high-rise that has everyone talking is 432 Park Avenue, the skinny eighty-nine-story spire that soars above the northwest corner of East 56th Street and Park on the former site of the Drake Hotel. Set for completion this spring, it was designed by the Uruguayan-born, New York-based architect Rafael Viñoly. Now the highest residential structure in the Western Hemisphere at 1,397 feet, 432 Park is officially New York City's second-tallest building (after David Childs's inevitably symbolic if architecturally negligible One World Trade Center of 2005–2014). Actually, it's the loftiest by twenty-eight feet in habitable space, since a broadcasting



A rendering of the condominium towers planned or under construction at 225 West 57th Street (Nordstrom Tower), 157 West 57th Street (One57), 111 West 57th Street, and 53 West 53rd Street in Manhattan

Armand Boudreaux/YIMBY/Google Earth

blockbuster at One57, the most expensive apartment in town had been 15 Central Park West's penthouse, which former Citigroup CEO Sanford Weill sold in 2011 to a daughter of a Russian oligarch for \$88 million. Weill more than doubled his investment four years after buying the full-floor flat for a then-record \$42.4 million.

Nothing succeeds commercially like mimicry, and Stern's limestone-clad, neotraditional design for that building was closely modeled after the 1920s and 1930s apartment houses of Rosario Candela, the Sicilian-born architect whose uncommonly capacious, generously detailed apartments are widely judged the city's most coveted. (Last year's second-costliest New York residential transfer amounted to \$71 million at Candela's legendary 740 Park Avenue.) 15 Central Park West has been nicknamed “the



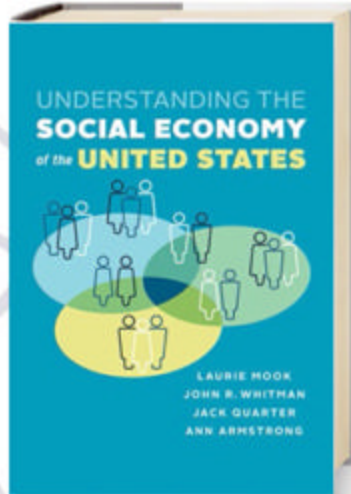
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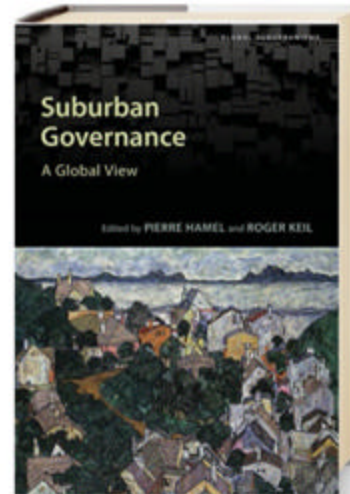
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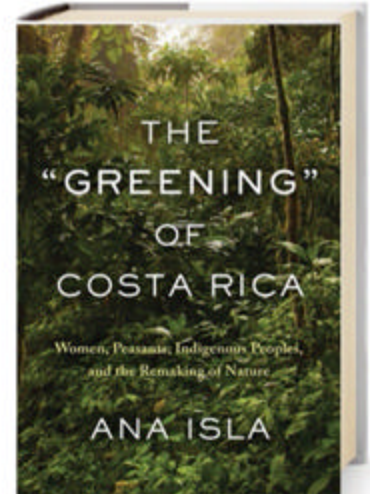
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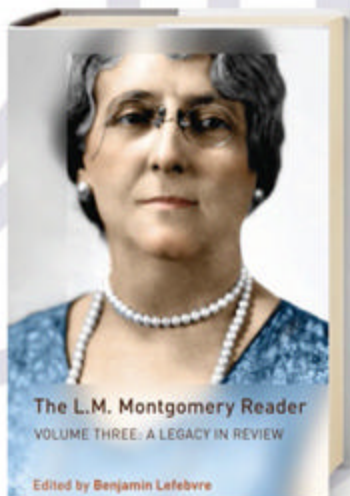


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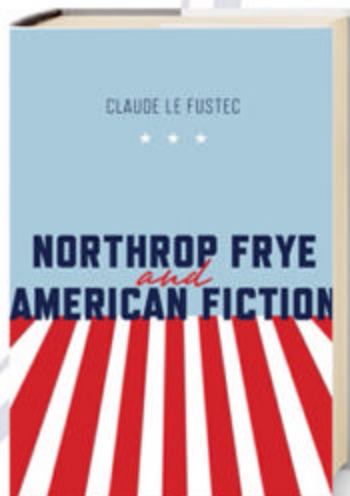


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mast accounts for the uppermost 408 feet of the Childs tower.

Many observers report being bemused, not to say unnerved, by the Viñoly building's strange ubiquitousness. Visible throughout all five boroughs and as far away as Long Island and New Jersey, it startles both visitors and natives with its thin looming omnipresence and seems to follow you around like a bad conscience. One doesn't hear much about 432 Park's design for the good reason that artistic niceties are almost beside the point in the mathematical conjuring that brought it and its peers into being. You could even say this structure resembles a three-dimensional balance sheet more than a fully articulated architectural façade.

While Stern clings to a passé post-modernism in much of his work, Viñoly hews closely to the reductive aesthetic of high modernism. The basically white exterior of 432 Park Avenue imparts a graphic feel accentuated by the flatness of the building's four identical sides, as well as the bold contrast between its dark glass windows (six large square panes per story) and white concrete panels that frame the minimalist fenestration. But what most sets this oddly disturbing composition apart is the way it shoots straight upward to its full, vertiginous height.

Together with the building's relatively small footprint—ninety-three feet square (about one quarter the length of a football field)—this uninterrupted ascent approximates the proportions of a medieval defensive tower in an Italian hill town. The configuration was made possible by city regulations that waive upper-story “wedding cake” setback requirements—instituted in 1916 to prevent overbuilt Lower Manhattan streets from turning into lightless, airless canyons—but only if a building occupies no more than one quarter of its lot. Now that prices for Manhattan residences in prime locations have gone through the roof, it hardly seems wasteful to leave 75 percent of a plot empty on a \$1 billion speculation like 432 Park.

Among this new breed of towers, design elements not directly tied to profit are often downgraded or eliminated as overall costs climb. For example, Portzamparc poetically predicted that the rippling glass exterior he initially planned for One57 would evoke a cascading waterfall. As executed, however, the flat surface of the building's variously blue, gray, and silver panes fades into a pixelated blur even from a short distance. With today's mathematically generated super-spires, it's best to paraphrase Mae West: “Architecture has nothing to do with it.”

## 2.

The convergent forces that have shaped this sudden juncture in Manhattan's architectural development were examined in “Sky High and the Logic of Luxury,” an illuminating exhibition held at the Skyscraper Museum in New York just as these remarkable mutants were beginning to drastically alter the cityscape. If anything, this prescient overview—curated by Carol Willis, founding director of the museum and author of *Form Follows Finance: Skyscrapers and Skylines in New York and*

*Chicago*<sup>1</sup>—came a bit too prematurely to fully benefit from the dawning public awareness that a singular departure was upon us. As Willis wrote for the exhibition's wall texts:

Beginning around 2012, sales of condos in ultra-luxury buildings reached \$8,000–\$10,000 per sq.ft. and in some cases even higher. These records have set a new standard that developers use to raise the budget for project expenses. The “logic of luxury” is the idea that high development costs for a project are good business strategy if they can produce extraordinary profits....

Expensive land and air rights, “starchitect” design fees, special engineering and construction, extra-high ceilings, and abundant amenities all factor in a simple math that stratospheric sale prices justify....

Sophisticated engineering and advances in material strengths have made these spindles possible, but it is the excited market for premium Manhattan real estate that is driving both heights and prices skyward. Predicated on Central Park views and other exceptional vistas, these aeries appeal to a distinct clientele to whom developers direct their marketing psychology.

Happily, Willis plans to write a book that will expand on this exhibition's findings, but she is not the only analyst to draw direct connections between the sudden emergence of this construction binge and the workings of high finance.

Today, more New York real estate than ever is held by absentee owners, and in at least five large Manhattan condominiums most units are not primary residences. Although many such pieds-à-terre are doubtless used by Americans, they are most attractive to foreign nationals eager to secure a foothold in the US in the event of trouble in their homelands. International capital flight has thus been the decisive impetus in this booming sector of the New York property market, as people from all over the world seek a politically stable and financially secure haven for themselves and their assets.

In February, *The New York Times* published “Towers of Secrecy,” a five-part investigative series by Louise Story and Stephanie Saul that focused on condominium buyers from four countries (India, Malaysia, Mexico, and Russia) and revealed how clandestine ownership of apartments in the city's most expensive buildings is often abetted through shell companies, to say nothing of a veritable industry of New York City facilitators. For example, the reporters found that a majority of apartments in a half-dozen luxury condos are nominally owned through entities that are often obscure, including One57 (77 percent), Time Warner Center (64 percent), and 15 Central Park West (58 percent). And 58 percent of New York City condominiums are paid for entirely in cash, which makes buyers more untraceable because no mortgage documentation is involved. As Story and Saul write:

An entire chain of people involved in high-end real estate sales—law-

<sup>1</sup>Princeton Architectural Press, 1995.

yers, accountants, title brokers, escrow agents, real estate agents, condo boards and building workers—often operate with blinders on. As Rudy Tauscher, a former manager of condos at Time Warner, said: “The building doesn't know where the money is coming from. We're not interested.”

A report jointly issued in February by Wealth-X (a self-described “private wealth consultancy”) and Sotheby's International Real Estate confirms that New York is the world's favorite



A rendering of Rafael Viñoly's condominium tower at 432 Park Avenue

refuge for second-home buyers from abroad (London is number two). The largest proportion of non-American purchasers of residential real estate in the city are British, contradicting conventional wisdom that Russians and Chinese are dominant. Although *The New York Times* recently reported that in the year ending in March 2014 Chinese buyers accounted for \$22 billion in real estate sales in the US—almost one quarter of all purchases by foreigners—they prefer suburban houses to metropolitan apartments. According to one Sotheby's broker, “New York City is the concrete jungle, much like Beijing or Shanghai. Long Island offers fresh air, no pollution, the waterfront.”

The stratospheric amounts now at stake in newly built Manhattan buildings perhaps can be best understood by comparison with today's contemporary art market, where multimillion-dollar paintings and sculptures have become favored instruments in the global transfer of vast and largely unregulated sums. The more expensive the object, the more money can be shifted internationally in one transaction, with the artworks themselves—mere markers

to some degree—making a useful stop-over at the Geneva Freeport, the tax-free air entrepôt in Switzerland used by dealers and collectors to reduce or eliminate import duties and value-added taxes. However, much as the new super-tall New York condos may serve that same general purpose, these are no works of art. If, as Goethe posited, architecture is frozen music, then these buildings are vertical money.

Interestingly, there's a clear architectural disparity between the bland billionaires' behemoths of Midtown North and the smaller, livelier, but scarcely inexpensive condominiums clustered around the High Line two miles to the southwest in Chelsea. Unlike the 57th Street corridor, where city planning loopholes have been cunningly exploited to capitalize on the immense profits to be reaped from supersized condominiums, areas adjacent to the High Line have not been “up-zoned.” Greater building heights are largely confined to nearby north-south avenues.

The enormous popular success of the High Line and the arty cachet of its environs—the city's principal contemporary art galleries crowd the West 10s and 20s, and the Whitney Museum of American Art will open its new home at the elevated park's southern end this spring—have made this a much-sought-after neighborhood among affluent young creative sorts.<sup>2</sup> As a result, developers have been willing to sponsor architecturally inventive schemes in Chelsea to appeal to an audience more aesthetically sophisticated than the cautious foreign investors who gravitate to blue-chip Midtown North.

The art world favorite Annabelle Selldorf has designed both galleries and apartments near the High Line. Developers particularly like Pritzker Prize winners for the implicit cultural validation they bring to a project, as Portzamparc did when Extell hired him to design One57. The Pritzker laureates Shigeru Ban and Jean Nouvel have built condominiums near the High Line, and foundations have been laid for a thirty-nine-unit condo by the award's 2004 recipient, Zaha Hadid, alongside it at 28th Street. Her swooping streamlined eleven-story composition—in a retro-futuristic style—is scheduled for completion in 2016 and will rival prices achieved in Midtown North if its penthouse sells for the reported \$35 million asking price. That building's developer, Related Companies, has enlisted another Pritzker honoree, Rem Koolhaas, to do a building next to the High Line at West 18th Street.

In tandem with all this high-priced development, New York City housing since the turn of the millennium has become far less affordable (especially for young people, except for those who work in financial services or other highly lucrative fields). Last year the median price paid for dwellings in the city rose to a new high of \$1.31 million, with more than seven thousand residences valued at \$5 million or more. Gone are the days when aspiring writers, artists, actors, dancers, and other low-earning bohemians could count on finding a solo dwelling in

<sup>2</sup>See my “Up in the Park,” *The New York Review*, August 13, 2009, and “Higher and Higher,” *The New York Review*, November 24, 2011.





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John Egan. *Portable Harp*, c. 1820. The O'Brien Collection. Photo: Jamie Stukenberg, Professional Graphics.





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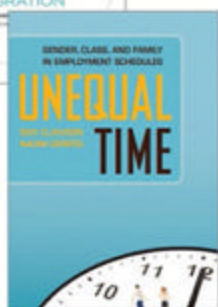
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Manhattan. Apart from the newfound fashionableness of Brooklyn—where the hippest sections are now prohibitively expensive—even the remotest reaches of the outer boroughs are being gentrified, and longtime tenants sometimes find themselves priced out of their own neighborhoods.

To combat this trend, New York State Senator Brad Hoylman of Manhattan last fall said he would sponsor a bill in the Albany legislature to impose a property tax surcharge on nonprimary residences in New York City valued at \$5 million and higher, which one study says could generate some \$665 million to subsidize low- and middle-income housing. Predictably, the city's powerful real estate industry—largely controlled by a few dozen family-owned firms, some with long-standing ties to politicians of both major parties—is up in arms over the idea, and thus the prospect of the bill's being approved by one of the country's more compromised state governments appears quite unlikely.

Nonetheless, this brave initiative is surely more equitable than incentives given to developers of Manhattan's new safe deposit boxes in the sky. As Charles V. Bagli reported in the *Times* in February, under New York City's Property Tax Exemption Program, known as 421a, the \$100 million apartment at One57 qualified for a 95 percent tax cut worth about \$360,000 this year. (Such abatements decrease over time and usually expire in twenty-five years or less.)

In return for these breaks, developers are required to create housing for low-income tenants, but fewer than 10 percent of new dwellings in the city have been earmarked as such. Some of those subsidized units are located in the new luxury towers themselves (though in a few instances are accessible only through a separate entrance that activists have scorned as "the poor door"). Developers can also support off-site affordable housing in order to qualify apartments for 421a status, as Extell did with One57 by underwriting sixty-six such units in the Bronx. However, in his 2015 State of the City address, Mayor Bill de Blasio asserted that "the city has for decades let developers write their own rules.... Sometimes projects included affordable housing...but far too often, they did not." He identified six neighborhoods outside Manhattan where developers would be compelled to build 80,000 units of affordable housing over the next decade, and twice that number of market-rate properties in general.

If the mayor's promises are kept, they come just in time. Lately in New York, no one has it as bad as the growing homeless population, estimated at nearly 68,000 in 2014—an increase of about 5 percent over the preceding year. And while homelessness nationwide has declined by about one third since 2010, it has risen by 21.5 percent in the city during the same period. None of these demographic shifts is accidental. During his twelve years in office, Mayor Michael Bloomberg repeatedly declared his intention to make New York—a municipality long renowned for turning generations of poor immigrants into middle-class taxpayers—into what the political blogger Alex Pareene has termed the billionaire businessman's "perfectly engineered technocratic dream city."

As Bloomberg said in 2013, "If we could get every billionaire around the world to move here it would be a godsend." In fact, he believes that economic inequality in the city is attributable not to growing poverty among the many but burgeoning wealth among the few:

The reason [the income gap] is so big is that at the higher end we've been able to do something that none of these other cities can do, and that is attract a lot of the very wealthy from around the country and around the world. They are the ones that pay a lot of the taxes. They're the ones that spend a lot of money in the stores and restaurants and create a big chunk of our economy. And we take the tax revenues from those people to help people throughout the entire rest of the spectrum.

Such Reagan-era fantasies of trickle-down economics aside, Bloomberg's brand of wealth redistribution would seem more heavily weighted toward plutocrats than paupers. A dispassionate but ultimately critical analysis of the three-term mayor's grand vision for Darwinian upscale urbanism can be found in *Bloomberg's New York: Class and Governance in the Luxury City* by the anthropologist Julian Brash, which received insufficient attention when it was published four years ago.<sup>3</sup> Brash shows that the mayor imagined the city

as a place of competition, elite sociality, cosmopolitanism, and luxury, populated by ambitious, creative, hardworking, and intelligent innovators.... The Bloomberg Way constituted an effort to establish the dominance of the ascendant postindustrial elite vis-à-vis other social groupings in New York City.

This had, according to its critics on both the left and right, "deleterious effects...on small businesses, the middle class, and taxpayers."

Today's race to erect ever-higher, ever-more-luxurious Manhattan condominiums recalls the early-twentieth-century competition to win New York City bragging rights for the world's tallest building, as one record-breaking tower after another rose in dizzying succession. Yet not one of New York's postmillennial claimants to that lineage possesses an iota of the aesthetic élan that distinguished those early skyscrapers, internationally renowned as America's signal contribution to modern architectural form. Here one can point, for example, to the Woolworth, Chrysler, and Empire State buildings.

In contrast, the smokestack-like protuberances that now disrupt the skyline of midtown Manhattan signify the steadily widening worldwide gap between the unimaginably rich and the unconscionably poor. Those of us who believe that architecture invariably (and often unintentionally) embodies the values of the society that creates it will look upon these etiolated oddities less with wonder over their cunning mechanics than with revulsion over the larger, darker machinations they more accurately represent.

—March 3, 2015

<sup>3</sup>University of Georgia Press, 2011.



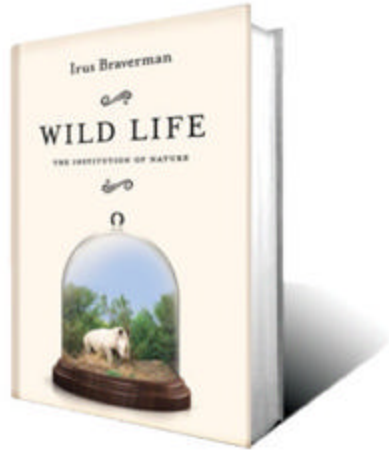
# New from Stanford



## **Pilate and Jesus** GIORGIO AGAMBEN

Coming just as Agamben is bringing his decades-long *Homo Sacer* project to an end, *Pilate and Jesus* sheds considerable light on what is at stake in that series as a whole. At the same time, it stands on its own, perhaps more than any of the author's recent works. It thus serves as a perfect starting place for readers who are curious about Agamben's approach but do not know where to begin.

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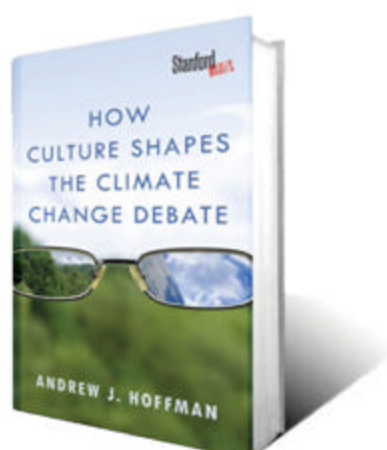


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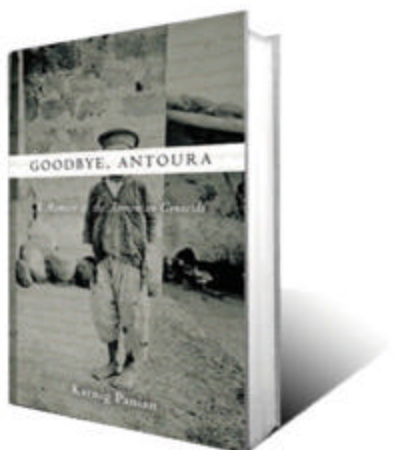


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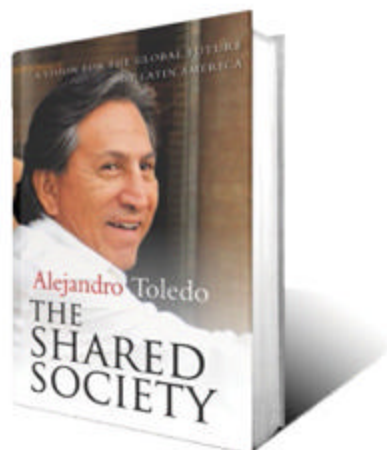


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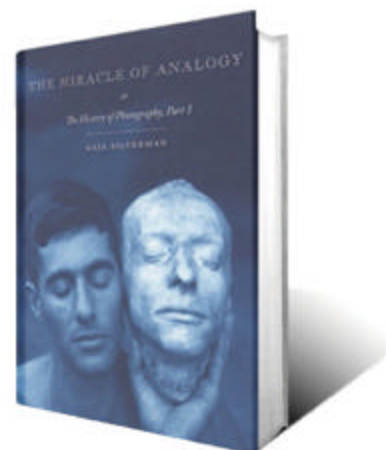


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# The Godfather of Modernism

Charles Simic

**“Literchoor Is My Beat”:  
A Life of James Laughlin,  
Publisher of New Directions**  
by Ian S. MacNiven.  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux,  
584 pp., \$37.50

**The Collected Poems  
of James Laughlin**  
edited with an introduction and notes  
by Peter Glassgold.  
New Directions, 1,214 pp., \$ 49.95

It's not often that a biographer is as fortunate with his subject as Ian S. MacNiven has been with James Laughlin. As the founder and publisher of New Directions, the most prominent press in this country of modernist American and foreign literature, Laughlin not only had an interesting life, or more accurately several lives that he somehow managed to lead concurrently, he also exchanged thousands of letters with writers he published, friends, and family members, thus leaving behind an astounding amount of material for his future biographer.

His story and the story of the company he ran for over fifty years as well as the history of modernism in this country are so intertwined that they cannot be told separately. It is worth recalling that avant-garde writing in the 1930s, when he started his press, was either totally unknown or regarded as a joke. I don't believe Laughlin ever thought of himself as a missionary, but he ended by influencing what generations of educated Americans read and what poetry and fiction were taught in schools.

Fifty years ago, when libraries on army posts in the United States and overseas were often as well stocked as small-town libraries, I came across a large collection of New Directions books in Toul, France, and over a period of fifteen months I got myself an education in modern literature no college course could equal. I'd lie on my bunk in the barracks reading Céline, Sartre, Nabokov, Djuna Barnes, Pound, and Williams late into the night, while my buddies played cards and listened to their radios. I may have been just a lowly private, but unknown to anyone else there, with the sole exception of a Frenchwoman who was the post librarian, I was in heaven.

James Laughlin was born in 1914 in Pittsburgh, into a wealthy family in the steel business. The Jones & Laughlin Steel Corporation had been founded three generations earlier in 1856 by his great-grandfather, who with his partner made a fortune during the Civil War as the main producers of iron rails. By 1900 they were the second-largest steel producer in the United States. Andrew Carnegie and the Mellons lived down the street from them. Laughlin “would later characterize his birthplace as tough-minded, practical, and philistine,” recalling how after the coffee a butler would pass around chewing gum on a silver tray.

There was a lot of Bible reading and catechism, but no deep religious feelings. He once asked an uncle what the sacred studies were and the uncle replied that he wasn't really sure, but guessed they came in a bottle. Laughlin's mother attended the Presbyterian Church and was one of its benefactors,

James Laughlin



but his father, who had resigned his position in the company and held no job, left religion alone, spending Sundays boating, hunting, or going to the races and the rest of the week diverting himself with long-hooded cars and women.

His son was an insecure child well cared for by servants. His interest in literature didn't develop until he was exposed to French poetry in boarding school at Le Rosey in Switzerland and subsequently at Choate in Connecticut, which he started attending at fourteen and where one of his teachers, Dudley Fitts, made him read the classics and modernists and later provided him with introductions to Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound. His parenting, by the time he had moved east to attend school, was taken up by an aunt and uncle living in Norfolk, Connecticut. What he retained from his upbringing was a social conscience that placed wealth second in importance to service and left him with residual guilt for being rich. Jones & Laughlin had a reputation as the toughest anti-union company in America, so it is worth noting that in his forties Laughlin divested himself of whatever holdings he had in the steel business.

Harvard University, where Laughlin matriculated in 1932, was an aloof and cliquish place in comparison to Choate. Nonetheless, he got close to a few professors, most importantly to Harry Levin, a scholar of enormous learning in many literatures and subsequent author of *James Joyce: A Critical Introduction*, which New Directions published in 1941. One would think that

such a brilliant circle of acquaintances would have made him content, but to everyone's surprise, he went to Europe after his freshman year.

After a short stay in Austria, he wrote a brash letter to Pound in Rapallo, asking whether he would care to see him and telling him that he was an American “said to be clever” and known to Fitts, who wanted “elucidation” of certain basic aspects of the *Cantos* so that he may be able to “preach” them intelligently to others. Finally he boasted that as an editor of *The Harvard Advocate* and Yale's *Harkness Hoot*, he had access to “the few men in the two universities” who were “worth bothering about.” Pound replied promptly and invited him to visit, and upon meeting Laughlin gave him the names and addresses of people like William Carlos Williams and others he wanted the young man to see when he returned to the States.

Back at Harvard, Laughlin became the recipient of Pound's jocular letters addressed to “Dilectus Filius” in Pound's peculiar lingo, delivering sweeping judgments of everything from American education—“No prof. expected to know anything he wasn't TAUGHT when a student”—to politics—“F.D.[R.] has gone communist but New Masses will never find it out.” When Laughlin said some disparaging things about T. S. Eliot, Pound rushed to the defense of his old friend, saying: “When Joyce and Wyndham L. have long since gaga'd or exploded, Old Possum will be totin' round de golf links and givin' bright nickels to the lads of 1987.”

Laughlin took a leave of absence from Harvard the following year and

returned to Europe. He stayed with Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas in their country place in Bilignin for a month and accompanied them on a motoring tour of southern France. He found Stein to be the most charismatic person he'd ever met and admired her artistic integrity, but grew weary of her boasting. Once she caught him reading Proust and demanded angrily how he could read such stuff. Didn't he know, she said, that both Joyce and Proust imitated her novel *The Making of Americans*?

After his visit with her, Laughlin continued to Rapallo to take up his “stud-ies” in the “Ezuversity,” a marvelous educational institution with no tuition, where classes consisted of Pound's nonstop monologue as he ate his meals, played tennis, and went swimming and hiking. “Literachoor is news that stays news,” he told him. Laughlin, who came to know many epic talkers in his life, “invariably held up Pound as the standard against whom all other talkers were to be measured,” MacNiven writes.

It was partly his delivery, his form of Appalachian cracker-barrel mixed with English upper-class and Cockney accents, done in mockery, alternating with black American slang via Uncle Remus, all salted with profanity and peppered with words and phrases in many European tongues.

No wonder Laughlin stayed for several months. Occasionally, Pound took a look at his poems, slashing with a pencil words and entire pages and telling him to simplify, pare it down, and make it new. As MacNiven notes, Laughlin found in Pound not a replacement for his own father, but an intellectual father, a *soul's* father. Nonetheless, even at that young age, he saw his mentor clearly as both vain and humble, patient and rash, clear-sighted yet prejudiced; a genius in some ways, a simpleton in others. Pound complained about the difficulties writers like him and Williams had in finding good publishers in the United States. Writing to Williams, he told him that his pupil wanted to stay in Rapallo, but that he urged him to return to the US and try to see if anything could be done in that sloppy country. “I went to him with fairly conventional views about almost everything,” Laughlin says in his *Paris Review* interview, “and I left him with either very eccentric or radical views about everything—views which have persisted with me to the present day.”

Well, not quite *everything*. Laughlin became embroiled with Pound about his fascist sympathies and his anti-Semitism almost from the beginning of their long relationship. Pound kept denying that he was anti-Semitic, insisting that he was only against big usurers and monopolists and not the working-class Jews. “My connection with Pound always lays me open to attacks of being a Fascist,” Laughlin complained to Delmore Schwartz, “and that is not very pleasant.” He would remain a convert to Pound's economic theories, while loathing his racist theories and his politics. He made that clear to him



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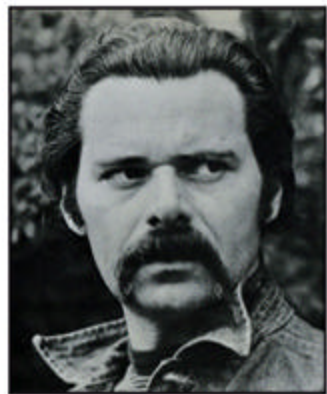
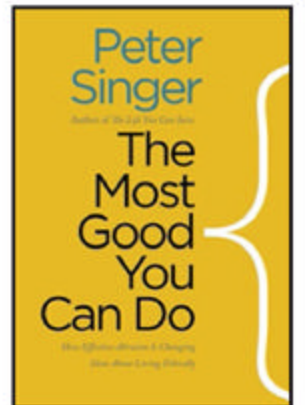
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in a letter he wrote on December 5, 1939:

I think anti-semitism is contemptible and despicable and I will not put my hand to it. I cannot tell you how it grieves me to see you taking up with it. It is vicious and mean. I do not for one minute believe that it is solely the Jews who are responsible for the maintenance of the unjust money systems. They may have their part in it, but it is just as much, and more, the work of Anglo-Saxons and Celts and Goths and what have you.

Laughlin began his career in publishing as the literary editor of *New Democracy*, a magazine devoted to the economic theory of Social Credit, where he published Pound, Stein, and Williams in a section of the magazine entitled “New Directions.” As Robert Lowell recalled years later, “our only strong and avant-garde man [at Harvard] was James Laughlin.” Upon his return to the university, he gathered the best of these pieces and put them together in an anthology called *New Directions in Prose and Poetry*. The impressive table of contents included Williams, Pound, Elizabeth Bishop, Henry Miller, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, Kay Boyle, Jean Cocteau, E. E. Cummings, and others now less known.

Laughlin initially ran his fledgling publishing company from his dorm room, and after that, from a barn converted into an office on his Aunt Leila’s estate in Norfolk, Connecticut. In a brochure sent to librarians at the time, he spoke of the need for a publishing house concentrating on books of purely literary rather than commercial value. In MacNiven’s summary, “to achieve financial rewards, ‘the average publisher’ must perforce cater to the ‘poor taste of the masses.’ *New Directions* would cater to ‘the cultivated taste of educated readers.’” The number of such readers being few, he managed to stay afloat while publishing money-losing books thanks to a nice chunk of money from his father and an additional one from his family until the press finally turned a profit in 1947.

Founded with the encouragement of Pound, his company relied on the advice of writers with whom Laughlin was friendly. Eliot introduced Djuna Barnes; Pound, William Carlos Williams; Williams, Nathanael West; Edith Sitwell, Dylan Thomas; Henry Miller, Hermann Hesse, though many of these unofficial advisers could be as fervent in their hatreds as in their enthusiasm.

Delmore Schwartz, for instance, advised him to publish Pound’s collected essays, publish Pasternak and Nabokov, reprint Dylan Thomas, make every effort to keep Williams, and disastrously to reject F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Crack-Up*. Kenneth Rexroth, who would become one of his most frequently published authors with twenty-eight books, had a low opinion of Schwartz’s poetry, asking Laughlin: “Is it really true that you plan to publish nothing but the Complete Delmore Schwartz from here on?” Edward Dahlberg, another one of his authors, complained that his list leaned “too much toward preciousness, . . . experimentalism, dadaism, gagaism. . . . Publish six or seven or ten artists, follow them

through, and you can create a lasting literature,” he told him. “This publishing philosophy,” as MacNiven says, “was exactly the direction in which” Laughlin himself was already moving.

His most important contribution may have been in bringing foreign writers to American readers. The list includes Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Rilke, Valéry, Kafka, Montale, Neruda, Queneau, Lorca, Paz, Borges, Mishima, Svevo, Landolfi, Céline, Gide, Apollinaire, Cendrars, and Hesse’s *Siddhartha*, which became a best seller. Pound and Williams, however, were the backbone of the press, followed in later years by Henry Miller, Tennessee Williams, and Thomas Merton.

“For better or worse,” Laughlin once said about the press, “there has been no editorial pattern beyond the publisher’s



James Laughlin and Ezra Pound, Rapallo, Italy, circa 1934

inclinations, his personal response to the manuscripts which came his way.” He chickened out when he had a chance to publish Nabokov’s *Lolita*, but brought out other unconventional and shocking books that would have appalled his family had they bothered to read them. When his mother did, she sent her chauffeur to the bookstores in Pittsburgh to buy up copies of the anthology *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* 1939, which included selections from Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Capricorn*.

The biggest complaint Laughlin’s authors had about their publisher, aside from miserable advances and small royalty checks, is that he used to absent himself for months to go skiing in this country and Europe and could not be reached. For example, after publishing William Carlos Williams’s novel *White Mule* in 1937, he left to go skiing in New Zealand. When bookstores sought additional copies of the novel, he was not around to get more bound, infuriating Williams, who nursed a grudge against him for years. He wasn’t the only one. Many others griped, and some like Rexroth wrote nasty letters heaping contempt on him, even though in some cases he paid his writers’ rent and bailed them out of jail. Despite the insults, Laughlin’s faith in their genius never wavered. His defense was that most of the time *New Directions* lost money, so that he was obliged to keep the losses to a minimum, and that their own books didn’t sell well.

As for skiing, he couldn’t help himself. He said that he went to Harvard

rather than Princeton because it was closer to ski slopes in New Hampshire and Vermont. Despite falling and breaking his back in 1936, he continued skiing and later founded with some ski buddies the Alta Ski Area in Utah, which after World War II, when alpine skiing became popular, brought enormous returns on his original investment. Years later he admitted that he could have been more attentive to his writers had he been less absent from the office, but skiing meant a lot to him and was in addition an opportunity to make some money to support his publishing venture, so that he wouldn’t have to go begging to his relatives.

Whatever the truth of the often-repeated tale that Pound took one look

at Laughlin’s poems in Rapallo and told him to forget poetry and go home and become a publisher, which MacNiven doubts, the advice didn’t stick. Laughlin wrote poems all his life and had five small books published by little-known presses, which he gave away mostly to his friends, some of whom, like Williams and Rexroth, praised the poems and meant it. However, once he was in his sixties and became more sedentary after a life of travel, he became astonishingly prolific, often writing three to four poems per day, so that more than three quarters of some 1,250 poems in the recent edition of his collected poems were written in the last fifteen years of his life. Even then, he didn’t make any effort to promote himself, claiming, when someone inquired about his poems, that he was a writer of light verse.

“Anything is good material for poetry,” Williams had said and Laughlin believed that too. Make it so simple that a child of six can understand the words (if not the sense), then take out all the words that aren’t doing anything useful, Pound had advised him. Nevertheless it was Williams’s free verse rather than Pound’s that influenced him.

To write his poems, Laughlin would type out a line of a poem and then make sure the length of the following line was within two typewriter spaces of the line preceding it, and go on from there. He called it “typewriter metric,” a mechanical space count in which the spaces between words counted equally with letters. Here’s how that kind of poem looks and sounds:

#### THE CAVE

*Leaning over me her hair  
makes a cave around her*

*face a darkness where her  
eyes are hardly seen she*

*tells me she is a cat she  
says she hates me because*

*I make her show her pleasure  
she makes a cat-hate*

*sound and then ever so  
tenderly hands under my*

*head raises my mouth into  
the dark cave of her love.*

Knowing several languages, being a lifelong reader of classics and an editor and a publisher familiar with not just American but many other literatures in the world, Laughlin was prodigiously learned. Pound made him a multiculturalist. He inherited his old teacher’s belief that the poets of the past are our contemporaries. “Catullus could rub words so hard/together their friction burned a/heat that warms//us now 2000 years away.” Pound was Laughlin’s master. Juxtaposing American life and spoken language with voices of the past was his forte as much as it was Pound’s. He wrote short lyric poems, long-line poems, prose poems, concrete poems, poems written entirely or in part in French or mixed with German, Greek, Italian, Latin, Provençal, and also humorous poems under the name of Hiram Handspring.

They vary greatly in subject matter. There is, for example, a lovely poem about meeting Baudelaire on the New York subway in the company of a light-skinned black girl. There is also an excruciating poem called “Experience of Blood” about the suicide of his son, who stabbed himself repeatedly in the bath. Laughlin describes how it took him four hours to wipe away the blood. In an early book, he published a poem about the greed and callousness of American businessmen during the Great Depression:

#### CONFIDENTIAL REPORT

*The president of the  
corporation was of the*

*opinion that the best  
thing to do was just*

*to let the old ship  
sink as pleasantly &*

*easily as possible be-  
cause it was plain as*

*day you couldn’t op-  
erate at a profit as*

*long as that man was  
in the white house &*

*now he was there for  
good you might just*

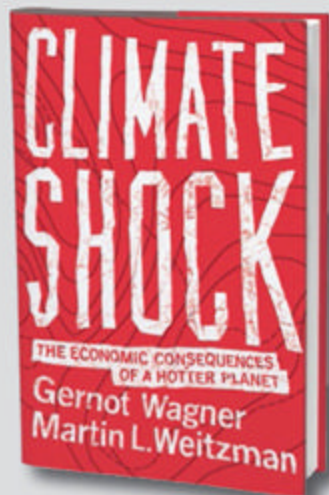
*as well fold yr hands  
and shut yr face and*

*let the old boat take  
water till she sank.*

If Laughlin is remembered as a poet—and I very much hope he will be, since



# Changing the Conversations that Change the World



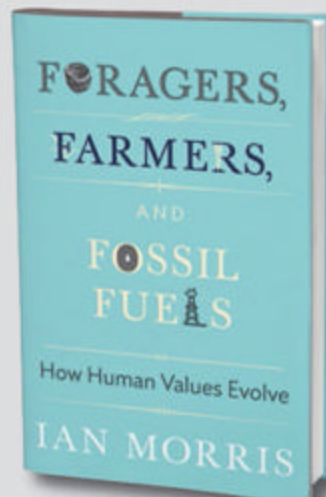
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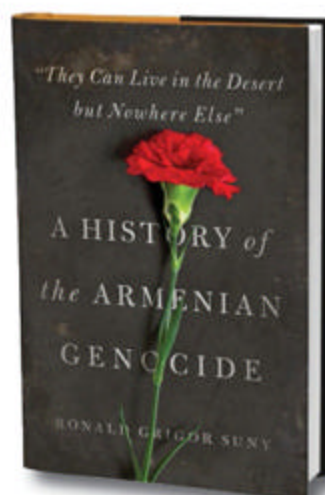
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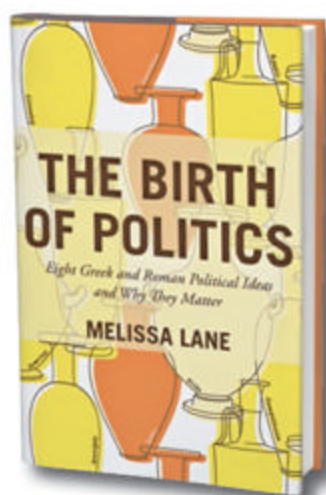
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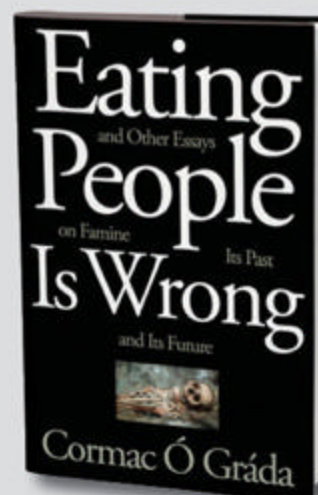
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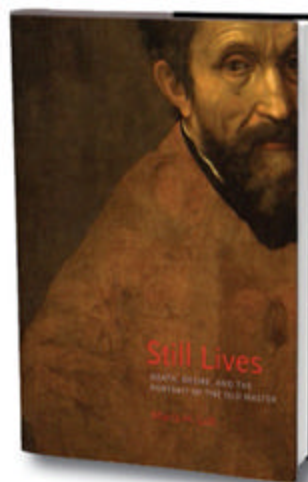
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he wrote many beautiful poems—it will be for his erotic poems. He wrote hundreds of them, many of them in his old age. They were about women he was in love with over the years, recalling what it was like being with them. With three marriages and more illicit affairs than even his biographer can keep track of, it is impossible to know to whom the poems are addressed, though it is clear that they are addressed to particular women and not some generic idea of the loved one. Love poems are notoriously difficult to write, since the vocabulary relating to love and lovemaking is so limited and one's attraction to another human being is so difficult to convey beyond stock attitudes and hackneyed phrases, some of which have been in use by poets for over two thousand years.

Inevitably for someone so prolific, Laughlin wrote mediocre and forgettable poems, but not too many that are downright bad; because he was a cultivated, complex man with a life so full of memorable experiences, nearly everything he wrote is worth reading at least once. The surprise of the huge

book of his collected poetry is not just how many of the poems he wrote are good, but that most readers of poetry don't even realize they exist. Here, for example, is a poem written in his old age about death that is both grim and funny and that, I must confess, has haunted me since I first read it years ago while Laughlin was still alive:

## THE JUNK COLLECTOR

*what bothers me most about  
the idea of having to die*

*(sooner or later) is that  
the collection of junk I*

*have made in my head will  
presumably be dissipated*

*not that there isn't more  
and better junk in other*

*heads & always will be but  
I have become so fond of*

*my own head's collection.*

James Laughlin died in 1997 in Norfolk, Connecticut, at the age of eighty-three, from complications related to a stroke. I strongly hope that the simultaneous publication of his collected poems and of the hugely entertaining biography by MacNiven will not only perpetuate the memory of this extraordinary man and his poetry, but also renew interest in one of the richest periods in American literature. What makes any biography worth reading is not solely the interesting life of some famous or not-so-famous person, but the stories in it worth remembering and retelling. With so many fascinating and outrageous characters, many of whom turned out to be the biggest names in literature, there is a small encyclopedia of literary anecdotes in MacNiven's book, not counting the picaresque adventures of its tall, handsome hero who knew everybody and whom the ladies found irresistible, and who, as we come to learn, did all that astounding amount of reading, writing, skiing, and womanizing with just one functioning eye in his head. □

## FRANCE NOW

I slide my swastika into your lubricious Place Clichy.  
I like my women horizontal and when they stand up vicious and Vichy.  
I want to jackboot rhythmically down your Champs-Élysées  
With my behind behind me taking selfies of the Grand Palais.  
Look at my arm raised in the razor salute of greeting.  
I greet you like a Caesar, *Heil!* for our big meeting.  
My open-top Mercedes creeps through the charming, cheering crowd.  
I greet you, lovely body of Paris, you who are so proud,  
And surtout you French artists and French movie stars who  
Are eager to collaborate and would never hide a Jew.

My oh my. How times have changed.  
But the fanatics have gotten even more deranged.  
Seventy-five years after Hitler toured charming, cheering Paris, Parisians say  
They won't give in to terrorist tyranny, and yesterday  
Two million people marched arm-in-arm, hand-in-hand,  
After the latest murderous horror, to take a stand  
Against the fascist Nazi Islamist jihadi blasphemous horror and murder.  
Absurd is getting absurder.  
It's absurd in France to be a Jew  
Because someone will want to murder you—

Someone who spreads infidel blood all over the walls and floor like jam—  
Someone who, like you, doesn't eat ham.  
He/she activates her/his suicide vest.  
Children just out of the nest  
Wearing a suicide vest  
Are the best.  
It's alarming  
And queer to read Osama bin Laden writing an essay about global warming.  
So he was also human, like the ISIS fighters writing  
Poems in the manner of the great pre-Islamic odes in the midst of the fighting.

We are the Marseillaise. We are la civilisation française. Make no mistake,  
Civilization is at stake.  
We are a paper frigate sailing on a burning lake—  
Many decks and sails, and white and fancy as a wedding cake.  
Listen. The Mu'allāqa of Imru' al-Qays, the Iliad of the Arabs, keeps singing  
In the desert, "Come, let us weep," while the bells of Notre-Dame keep ringing  
With alarm. In one of the Hadith,  
Muhammad crowns me with a wreath  
But damns me for eternity, Imru' al-Qays, and Labīd as well,  
But me especially as the most poetic of poets and their leader into hell.

—Frederick Seidel



# Slouching Toward Mecca

Mark Lilla

## Soumission

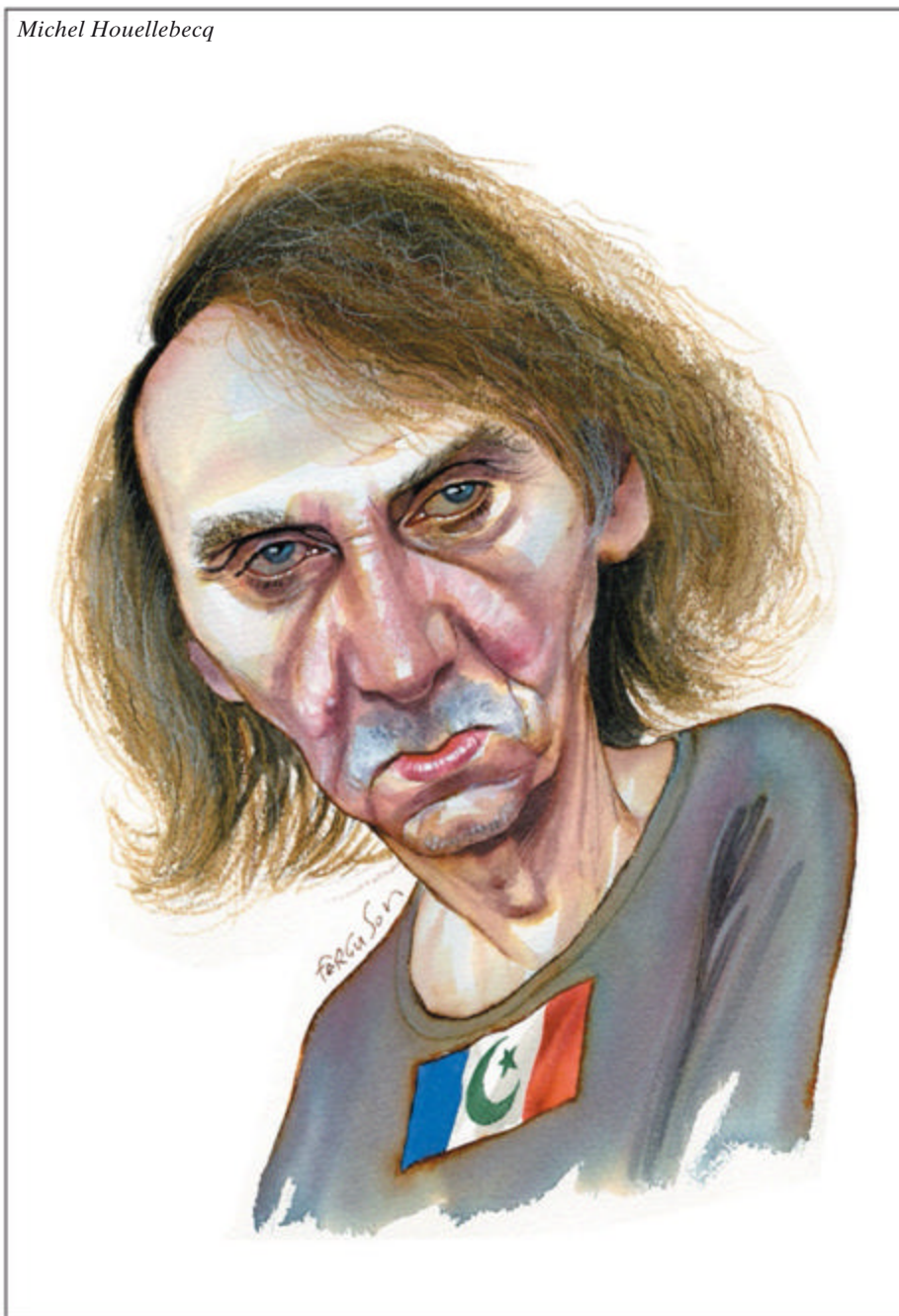
by Michel Houellebecq.  
Paris: Flammarion,  
300 pp., €21.00 (paper)  
(a translation from the French  
by Lorin Stein will be published by  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux in October)

The best-selling novel in Europe today, Michel Houellebecq's *Soumission*, is about an Islamic political party coming peacefully to power in France. Its publication was announced this past fall in an atmosphere that was already tense. In May a young French Muslim committed a massacre at a Belgian Jewish museum; in the summer Muslim protesters in Paris shouted "Death to the Jews!" at rallies against the war in Gaza; in the fall stories emerged about hundreds of French young people, many converts, fighting with ISIS in Syria and Iraq; a French captive was then beheaded in Algeria; and random attacks by unstable men shouting "*al-lahu akbar*" took place in several cities. Adding to the tension was a very public debate about another best seller, Éric Zemmour's *Le Suicide français*, that portrayed Muslims as an imminent threat to the French way of life.<sup>1</sup>

Zemmour's *succès de scandale* ensured that *Soumission* would be met with hysteria. So was the fact that Houellebecq had gotten into trouble a decade ago for telling an interviewer that whoever created monotheistic religion was a "cretin" and that of all the faiths Islam was "the dumbest." The normally measured editor of *Libération*, Laurent Joffrin, declared five days before *Soumission* appeared that Houellebecq was "keeping a place warm for Marine Le Pen at the Café de Flore." The reliably dogmatic Edwy Plenel, a former Trotskyist who runs the news site *Mediapart*, went on television to call on his colleagues, in the name of democracy, to stop writing news articles on Houellebecq—France's most important contemporary novelist and winner of the Prix Goncourt—effectively erasing him from the picture, Soviet style. Ordinary readers could not get their hands on the book until January 7, the official publication date. I was probably not the only one who bought it that morning and was reading it when the news broke that two French-born Muslim terrorists had just killed twelve people at the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*.

The irony was beyond anyone's imagination. And it was doubled by the fact that the cover of the *Charlie* published that day had a feature mocking Houellebecq as a masturbating drunkard. It was tripled when it was revealed that one of Houellebecq's close friends, the left-wing economist and *Charlie* contributor Bernard Maris, was among the victims. (Maris had just published a book, *Houellebecq économiste*, calling his friend the deepest analyst of life under contemporary capitalism.) Houellebecq appeared on television, devastated, then broke off his publicity tour and disappeared into the countryside. A few hours earlier Prime Minister Manuel Valls, in his first interview after the at-

Michel Houellebecq



tacks, felt obliged to say that "France is not Michel Houellebecq. It is not intolerance, hate, and fear." It is hardly likely that Valls had read his book.

Given all this, it will take a long time for the French to read and appreciate *Soumission* for the strange and surprising thing that it is. Michel Houellebecq has created a new genre—the dystopian conversion tale. *Soumission* is not the story some expected of a coup d'état, and no one in it expresses hatred or even contempt of Muslims. It is about a man and a country who through indifference and exhaustion find themselves slouching toward Mecca. There is not even drama here—no clash of spiritual armies, no martyrdom, no final conflagration. Stuff just happens, as in all Houellebecq's fiction. All one hears at the end is a bone-chilling sigh of collective relief. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. Whatever.

François, the main character of *Soumission*, is a mid-level literature professor at the Sorbonne who specializes in the work of the Symbolist novelist J. K. Huysmans. He is, like all Houellebecq's protagonists, what the French call *un pauvre type*.<sup>2</sup> He lives alone in

a modern apartment tower, teaches his courses but has no friends in the university, and returns home to frozen dinners, television, and porn. Most years he manages to pick up a student and start a relationship, which ends when the girl breaks it off over summer vacation with a letter that always begins, "I've met someone."

François is shipwrecked in the present. He doesn't understand why his students are so eager to get rich, or why journalists and politicians are so hollow, or why everyone, like him, is so alone. He believes that "only literature can give you that sensation of contact with another human spirit," but no one else cares about it. His sometime girlfriend Myriam genuinely loves him but he can't respond, and when she leaves to join her parents, who have emigrated to Israel because they feel unsafe in France, all he can think to say is: "There is no Israel for me." Prostitutes, even when the sex is great, only deepen the hole he is in.

We are in 2022 and a presidential election is about to take place. All the smart money—then as now—is on the National Front's Marine Le Pen winning the primary, forcing the other parties to form a coalition to stop her. The wild card in all this is a new, moderate Muslim party (the Muslim Brotherhood) that by now attracts about a fifth of the electorate, about as many as the

Socialists do. The party's founder and president, Mohammed Ben Abbas—a cross between Tariq Ramadan and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan before he took power—is a genial man who gets along well with Catholic and Jewish community leaders who share his conservative social views, and also with business types who like his advocacy of economic growth. Foreign heads of state, beginning with the pope, have given him their blessing. Given that Muslims make up at most 6 to 8 percent of the French population, it strains credibility to imagine such a party carrying any weight in ten years' time. But Houellebecq's thought experiment is based on a genuine insight: since the far right wants to deport Muslims, conservative politicians look down on them, and the Socialists, who embrace them, want to force them to accept gay marriage, no one party clearly represents their interests.<sup>3</sup>

François only slowly becomes aware of the drama swirling around him. He hears rumors of armed clashes between radical right-wing nativist groups (which exist in France) and armed radical Islamists, but newspapers worried about rocking the multicultural boat have ceased reporting such things. At a cocktail party he hears gunfire in the distance, but people pretend not to notice and find excuses to leave, so he does too.

As expected, Le Pen wins the presidential primary but the Socialists and the conservative UMP don't have enough votes between them to defeat her. So they decide to back Ben Abbas in the runoff, and by a small margin France elects its first Muslim president. Ben Abbas decides to let the other parties divide up the ministries, reserving for the Muslim Brotherhood only the education portfolio. He, unlike his coalition partners, understands that a nation's destiny depends on how well it teaches young people fundamental values and enriches their inner lives. He is not a multiculturalist and admires the strict republican schools that he studied in, and that France abandoned.

Except in the schools, very little seems to happen at first. But over the next months François begins to notice small things, beginning with how women dress. Though the government has established no dress code, he sees fewer skirts and dresses on the street, more baggy pants and shirts that hide the body's contours. It seems that non-Muslim women have spontaneously adopted the style to escape the sexual marketplace that Houellebecq describes so chillingly in his other novels. Youth crime declines, as does unemployment when women, grateful for new family subsidies, begin to leave the workforce to care for their children.

François thinks he sees a new social model developing before his eyes, inspired by a religion he knows little

<sup>3</sup>As if on cue, though, a small Muslim party, the Union des Démocrates Musulmans Français, has recently been formed and will put up eight candidates in the March departmental elections.

<sup>1</sup>See my review of Zemmour's book in these pages, March 19, 2015.

<sup>2</sup>On Houellebecq's earlier work, see my "Night Thoughts," *The New York Review*, November 30, 2000.



about, and which he imagines has the polygamous family at its center. Men have different wives for sex, child-bearing, and affection; the wives pass through all these stages as they age, but never have to worry about being abandoned. They are always surrounded by their children, who have lots of siblings and feel loved by their parents, who never divorce. François, who lives alone and has lost contact with his parents, is impressed. His fantasy (and perhaps Houellebecq's) is not really the colonial one of the erotic harem. It is closer to what psychologists call the "family romance."

The university is a different story. After the Muslim Brotherhood comes to power, François, along with all other non-Islamic teachers, is prematurely retired with a full pension. Satisfied with the money, indifferent, or afraid, the faculty does not protest. A golden crescent is placed atop the Sorbonne gate and pictures of the Kaaba line the walls of the once-grim university offices, now restored with the money of Gulf sheikhs. The Sorbonne, François muses, has reverted to its medieval roots, back to the time of Abelard and Heloise. The new university president, who replaced the woman professor of gender studies who had presided over the Sorbonne, tries to woo him back with a better job at triple the pay, if he is willing to go through a pro forma conversion. François is polite but has no intention of doing so.

His mind is elsewhere. Since Myriam's departure he sinks to a level of despair unknown even to him. After passing yet another New Year's alone he starts sobbing one night, seemingly

without reason, and can't stop. Soon after—ostensibly for research purposes—he decides to spend some time in the Benedictine abbey in southern France where his hero J. K. Huysmans spent his last years after having abandoned his dissolute life in Paris and converted to mystical Catholicism in middle age.<sup>4</sup>

Houellebecq has said that originally the novel was to concern a man's struggle, loosely based on Huysmans's own, to embrace Catholicism after exhausting all the modern world had to offer. It was to be called *La Conversion* and Islam did not enter in. But he just could not make Catholicism work for him, and François's experience in the abbey sounds like Houellebecq's own as a writer, in a comic register. He only lasts two days there because he finds the sermons puerile, sex is taboo, and they won't let him smoke. And so he heads off to the Pyrenees town of Rocamadour, the impressive "citadel of faith" where medieval pilgrims once came to worship before the basilica's statue of the Black Madonna. François is taken with the statue and keeps returning, not sure quite why, until:

I felt my individuality dissolve.... I felt ready to lose myself, not to col-

<sup>4</sup>Huysmans was not alone in this. In the decades before and after World War I there was an epidemic of conversions and returns to Catholicism among French writers and intellectuals: Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, Charles Péguy, Max Jacob, Francis Jammes, Pierre Réverdy, and Gabriel Marcel, among others.

lapse, but to lose myself *in general*. I was in a strange state. It seemed the Virgin was rising from her base and growing larger in the sky. The baby Jesus seemed ready to detach himself from her, and I felt that all he had to do was raise his right arm and the pagans and idolaters would be destroyed, and the keys of the world restored to him.

But when it is over he chalks the experience up to hypoglycemia and heads back to his hotel for *confit de canard* and a good night's sleep. The next day he can't repeat what happened. After a half hour of sitting he gets cold and heads back to his car to drive home. When he arrives he finds a letter informing him that in his absence his estranged mother had died alone and been buried in a pauper's grave.

It's in this state that François happens to run into the university president, Robert Rediger, and finally accepts an invitation to talk. Rediger is Houellebecq's most imaginative fictional creation so far—part Mephisto, part Grand Inquisitor, part shoe salesman (those look great on you!), his speeches are psychologically brilliant and yet wholly transparent. The name is a macabre joke: it refers to Robert Redeker, a hapless French philosophy teacher who received credible death threats after publishing an article in *Le Figaro* in 2006 calling Islam a religion of hate, violence, and obscurantism—and who has been living ever since under constant police protection. (Needless to say, no journalists donned "Je suis Robert" buttons to show support for him.) President Rediger is his exact opposite: a smoothie who writes sophisticated books defending Islamic doctrine, and has risen in the academic ranks through flattery and influence-peddling. It is his cynicism that, in the end, makes it possible for François to convert.

To set the trap Rediger begins with a confession. It turns out that as a student he began on the radical Catholic right, though he spent his time reading Nietzsche rather than the Church Fathers. Secular humanistic Europe disgusted him. In the 1950s it had given up its colonies out of weakness of will, and in the 1960s generated a decadent culture that told people to follow their bliss as free individuals, rather than do their duty, which is to have large, churchgoing families. Unable to reproduce, Europe then opened the gates to large-scale immigration from Muslim countries, Arab and black, and now the streets of French provincial towns looked like souks.

Integrating such people was never in the cards; Islam does not dissolve in water, let alone in atheistic republican schools. If Europe was ever to recover its place in the world, he thought, it would have to drive out these infidels and return to the true Catholic faith. (The websites of French far-right *identitaire* groups are full of this kind of reasoning, if it can be called that, and the parallels with radical Islamism, which Houellebecq highlights throughout the book, leap out.)

But Rediger took this kind of thinking a step further than Catholic xenophobes do. At a certain point he couldn't ignore how much the Islamists' message overlapped with his

own. They, too, idealized the life of simple, unquestioning piety and despised modern culture and the Enlightenment that spawned it. They believed in hierarchy within the family, with wives and children there to serve the father. They, like he, hated diversity—especially diversity of opinion—and saw homogeneity and high birthrates as vital signs of civilizational health. And they quivered with the eros of violence. All that separated him from them was that they prayed on rugs and he prayed at an altar. But the more Rediger reflected, the more he had to admit that in truth European and Islamic civilizations were no longer comparable. By all the measures that really mattered, post-Christian Europe was dying and Islam was flourishing. If Europe was to have a future, it would have to be an Islamic one.

So Rediger changed to the winning side. And the victory of the Muslim Brotherhood proved that he was right to. As a former Islam specialist for the secret services also tells François, Ben Abbes is no radical Islamist dreaming of restoring a backward caliphate in the sands of the Levant. He is a modern European without the faults of one, which is why he is successful. His ambition is equal to that of the Emperor Augustus: to unify the great continent again and expand into North Africa, creating a formidable cultural and economic force. After Charlemagne and Napoleon (and Hitler), Ben Abbes would be written into European history as its first peaceful conqueror. The Roman Empire lasted centuries, the Christian one a millennium and a half. In the distant future, historians will see that European modernity was just an insignificant, two-century-long deviation from the eternal ebb and flow of religiously grounded civilizations.

This Spenglerian prophecy leaves François untouched; his concerns are all prosaic, like whether he can choose his wives. Still, something keeps him from submitting. As for Rediger, between sips of a fine Meursault and while his "Hello Kitty"—clad fifteen-year-old wife (one of three) brings in snacks, he goes in for the kill. As forbidden music plays in the background, he defends the Koran by appealing—in a brilliant Houellebecqian touch—to Dominique Aury's sadomasochistic novel *The Story of O*.

The lesson of *O*, he tells François, is exactly the same as that of the Holy Book: that "the summit of human happiness is to be found in absolute submission," of children to parents, women to men, and men to God. And in return, one receives life back in all its splendor. Because Islam does not, like Christianity, see human beings as pilgrims in an alien, fallen world, it does not see any need to escape it or remake it. The Koran is an immense mystical poem in praise of the God who created the perfect world we find ourselves in, and teaches us how to achieve happiness in it through obedience. Freedom is just another word for wretchedness.

And so François converts, in a short, modest ceremony at the Grande Mosquée de Paris. He does so without joy or sadness. He feels relief, just as he imagines his beloved Huysmans did when he converted to Catholicism. Things would change. He would get his wives and no longer have to worry about sex

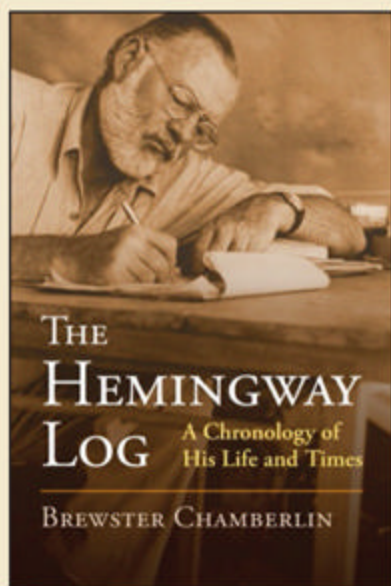
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or love; he would finally be mothered. Children would be an adjustment but he would learn to love them, and they would naturally love their father. Giving up drinking would be more difficult but at least he would get to smoke and screw. So why not? His life is exhausted, and so is Europe's. It's time for a new one—any one.

Cultural pessimism is as old as human culture and has a long history in Europe. Hesiod thought that he was living in the age of iron; Cato the Elder blamed Greek philosophy for corrupting the young; Saint Augustine exposed the pagan decadence responsible for Rome's collapse; the Protestant reformers felt themselves to be living in the Great Tribulation; French royalists blamed Rousseau and Voltaire for the Revolution; and just about everyone blamed Nietzsche for the two world wars. Though a minor work, *Soumission* is a classic novel of European cultural pessimism that belongs in whatever category we put books like Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*.

The parallels are enlightening. The protagonists in all three novels witness the collapse of a civilization they are indifferent to, and whose degradation leaves them unmoored. Trapped by history, Mann's Hans Castorp and Musil's Ulrich have no means of escape except through transcendence. After listening to unresolvable debates over freedom and submission in his Swiss sanatorium, Hans falls in love with a tubercular Beatrice and has a mysti-

cal experience while lost in the snow. Ulrich is a cynical observer of sclerotic Hapsburg Vienna until his estranged sister reenters his life and he begins having intimations of an equally mystical "other condition" for humanity. Houellebecq blocks this vertical escape route for François, whose experience at Rocamadour reads like a parody of Hans's and Ulrich's epiphanies, a tragicomic failure to launch. All that's left is submission to the blind force that history is.

There is no doubt that Houellebecq wants us to see the collapse of modern Europe and the rise of a Muslim one as a tragedy. "It means the end," he told an interviewer, "of what is, *quand même*, an ancient civilization." But does that make *Soumission* an Islamophobic novel? Does it portray Islam as an evil religion? That depends on what one means by a good religion. The Muslim Brotherhood here has nothing to do with the Sufi mystics or the Persian miniaturists or Rumi's poetry, which are often mentioned as examples of the "real" Islam that radical Salafism isn't. Nor is it the imaginary Islam of non-Muslim intellectuals who think of it on analogy with the Catholic Church (as happens in France) or with the inward-looking faiths of Protestantism (as happens in northern Europe and the US). Islam here is an alien and inherently expansive social force, an empire *in nuce*. It is peaceful, but it has no interest in compromise or in extending the realm of human liberty. It wants to shape better human beings, not freer ones.

Houellebecq's critics see the novel as anti-Muslim because they assume

that individual freedom is the highest human value—and have convinced themselves that the Islamic tradition agrees with them. It does not, and neither does Houellebecq. Islam is not the target of *Soumission*, whatever Houellebecq thinks of it. It serves as a device to express a very persistent European worry that the single-minded pursuit of freedom—freedom from tradition and authority, freedom to pursue one's own ends—must inevitably lead to disaster.

His breakout novel, *The Elementary Particles*, concerned two brothers who suffered unbearable psychic wounds after being abandoned by narcissistic hippy parents who epitomized the Sixties. But with each new novel it becomes clearer that Houellebecq thinks that the crucial historical turning point was much earlier, at the beginning of the Enlightenment. The qualities that Houellebecq projects onto Islam are no different from those that the religious right ever since the French Revolution has attributed to premodern Christendom—strong families, moral education, social order, a sense of place, a meaningful death, and, above all, the will to persist as a culture. And he shows a real understanding of those—from the radical nativist on the far right to radical Islamists—who despise the present and dream of stepping back in history to recover what they imagine was lost.

All Houellebecq's characters seek escape, usually in sex, now in religion. His fourth novel, *The Possibility of an Island*, was set in a very distant future when biotechnology has made it possible to commit suicide once life

becomes unbearable, and then to be refabricated as a clone with no recollection of our earlier states. That, for Houellebecq, would be the best of all possible worlds: immortality without memory. Europe in 2022 has to find another way to escape the present, and "Islam" just happens to be the name of the next clone.

Despite the extraordinary circumstances in which *Soumission* was published, and the uses to which it will be put on the French left (*Islamophobia!*) and right (*cultural suicide!*), Michel Houellebecq has nothing to say about how European nations should deal with its Muslim citizens or respond to fundamentalist terror. He is not angry, he does not have a program, and he is not shaking his fist at the traitors responsible for France's suicide, as Éric Zemmour is in his *Le Suicide français*.

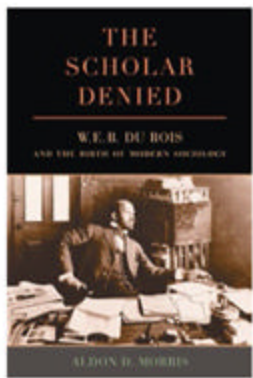
For all Houellebecq's knowingness about contemporary culture—the way we love, the way we work, the way we die—the focus in his novels is always on the historical *longue durée*. He appears genuinely to believe that France has, regrettably and irretrievably, lost its sense of self, but not because of immigration or the European Union or globalization. Those are just symptoms of a crisis that was set off two centuries ago when Europeans made a wager on history: that the more they extended human freedom, the happier they would be. For him, that wager has been lost. And so the continent is adrift and susceptible to a much older temptation, to submit to those claiming to speak for God. Who remains as remote and as silent as ever.

—This is the third of three articles.



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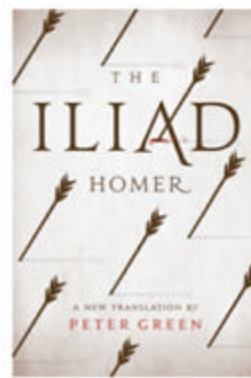


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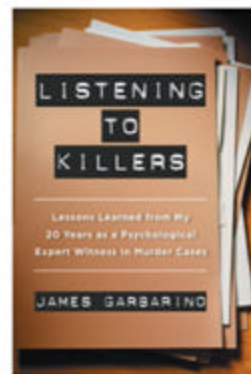


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# The Remains of the Britons

Joyce Carol Oates

## The Buried Giant

by Kazuo Ishiguro.  
Knopf, 317 pp., \$26.95

“Could they perform the task more slowly were they painted figures in a picture?” This authorial comment, in the concluding pages of Kazuo Ishiguro’s enigmatic new novel, is an acknowledgment of both the extraordinarily slow pace of *The Buried Giant* and its highly stylized, artificial tone. The book is set in post-Roman England at a time when the shadow of King Arthur “still falls across the land,” and Christianity seems very tentatively to have been established among Britons and Saxons. *The Buried Giant* is not strong in historical verisimilitude; its characters are so thinly drawn as to suggest figures in an ancient tapestry, or in an allegorical fable like Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas*.

With the first paragraph Ishiguro strikes a note of postmodernist detachment, establishing a distance between reader and text; we are aware throughout the novel of a narrative self-consciously *narrated*, in contrast to the seeming artlessness of the first-person voices of Ishiguro’s most notable previous novels, *The Remains of the Day* (1989) and *Never Let Me Go* (2005). Here, (contemporary) reader and (contemporary) author are conjoined as in a tourist’s overview of sixth-century England:

You would have searched a long time for the sort of winding lane or tranquil meadow for which England later became celebrated. There were instead miles of desolate, uncultivated land; here and there rough-hewn paths over craggy hills or bleak moorland. Most of the roads left by the Romans would by then have become broken or overgrown, often fading into the wilderness. Icy fogs hung over rivers and marshes, serving all too well the ogres that were then still native to this land. The people who lived nearby—one wonders what desperation led them to settle in such gloomy spots—might well have feared these creatures, whose panting breaths could be heard long before their deformed figures emerged from the mist....

In any case, ogres were not so bad provided one did not provoke them.

Introduced into the narrative with playful matter-of-factness, “ogres” have virtually no part in *The Buried Giant*, and the “buried giant” turns out to be a metaphor.

*The Buried Giant* is a coolly orchestrated text in which ideas about human nature, human memory, and the vicissitudes of a war-tormented history constitute the essential drama; it is not a book essentially about the experiences of hapless Briton and Saxon characters as they are moved about the landscape like chess pieces in a game beyond their comprehension. There is a John Barthian bluntness to our introduction to the elderly Briton couple whose quixotic quest to visit their long-departed son constitutes the basic plot of the novel:



Kazuo Ishiguro, North London, 2010

In one such area on the edge of a vast bog, in the shadow of some jagged hills, lived an elderly couple, Axl and Beatrice. Perhaps these were not their exact or full names, but for ease, this is how we will refer to them.... Our elderly couple lived within [a] sprawling warren—“building” would be too grand a word—with roughly sixty other villagers.... I am sorry to paint such a picture of our country at that time, but there you are.

Elsewhere the authorial voice, with its ease of omniscience qualified by a distinct national identity, suggests the slightly formal, bland voice-over of a travelogue: “The view before them that morning may not have differed so greatly from one to be had from the high windows of an English country house today.” It is particularly attentive to descriptions of a generic sort: “Once inside [the building], you would not have thought this longhouse so different from the sort of rustic canteen many of you will have experienced in one institution or another.” And there is a more self-consciously elevated authorial voice, a nudge in the reader’s ribs that is both jarring and perplexing:

Some of you will remember the fine monuments by which the living may remember the evil done to you. Some of you will have only crude wooden crosses or painted rocks, while yet others of you must remain hidden in the shadows of

history. You are in any case part of an ancient procession, and so it is possible the giant’s cairn [the hill with the allegedly buried figure] was erected to mark the site of some such tragedy long ago when young innocents were slaughtered in war.... One can see why on lower ground our ancestors might have wished to commemorate victory or a king.

Here, in this not entirely coherent passage, the narrator seems to be addressing a distinct “you”—an invisible and anonymous reader who is English, and part of an “ancient procession” that can be traced back to sixth-century England or earlier. (Ironically excluding Kazuo Ishiguro, born in Nagasaki, Japan, in 1954 and brought to England at the age of five.)

The curiously chatty, just perceptibly condescending narrative voice is an unfortunate distraction from what is an already somewhat enervated and overfamiliar fantasy of the kind known in publishing circles as “sword-and-sorcery”—a subgenre of fantasy that includes ogres, giants, dragons, knights, warriors, pilgrimages, and “quests.” It is a subgenre in which the most acclaimed classic work is J. R. R. Tolkien’s mythopoetic epic *The Lord of the Rings* and the most popular, and controversial, contemporary work is George R. R. Martin’s epic *A Song of Ice and Fire* (both in book form and in the much-acclaimed HBO series *Game*

*of Thrones*). Tolkien is essentially a Christian writer ideally read in adolescence or childhood; Martin’s dark, highly sexualized themes are fiercely adult, and not easily classifiable.

By contrast, Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant* is a more conventional generic work of fantasy fiction. There are naively innocent pilgrims embarked upon a quest through dangerous terrain; mysterious boatmen who may or may not be “good” in their dealings with the innocent; soldiers and swordsmen who are sometimes helpful, and sometimes threatening to the elderly couple. There are monks who plot to help them, or plot to hurt them; there are pixies, sprites, ogres, and a she-dragon named Querig responsible for the “mist of forgetfulness” that lies upon the land like a toxic fog; there is a kindly “medicine woman” and there is a noble warrior named Wistan whose bearing “set him apart from those around him.... ‘No matter that he tries to pass himself off as an ordinary Saxon.’”

Destined to supplant Wistan is a troubled youth (Edwin), about whom it is said that “a fierce future now opens before him”—a youth who has been ostracized by his own villagers because they suspect that he has been bitten by a dragon, whose infectious bite will have disastrous consequences: “Now the desire will be rising in his blood to seek congress with a she-dragon. And in turn, any she-dragon near enough to scent him will come seeking him.”

Most surprisingly amid this cast of characters there appears the elderly Sir Gawain, an attenuated survivor of King Arthur’s Round Table whose sword and “creaking” armor have grown rusted with decades, or perhaps it has been centuries; we first see Gawain as a seriocomic figure, resembling the affably senile White Knight in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, with “two metal legs stuck out stiffly onto the grass in a childlike way”; he has a face that is “kindly and creased”; his armor is “frayed and rusted, though no doubt he had done all he could to preserve it. His tunic, once white, showed repeated mending.” In post-Arthurian England the once-noble knight has become a garrulous buffoon:

Come forth, friends!... No harm will come to you! I’m a knight and a Briton too. Armed, it’s true, but come closer and you’ll see I’m just a whiskery old fool. This sword and armour I carry only out of duty to my king, the great and beloved Arthur, now many years in heaven....

Elderly Sir Gawain flies into a blustering rage when it’s suggested that a younger man should kill the she-dragon Querig, since Gawain has not been able to kill her for decades: “By what right... does your king order you to come from another country and usurp the duties given to a knight of Arthur?” When Gawain boasts of having faced “wolves with the heads of hideous hags... and at Mount Culwich, double-headed ogres that spewed blood at you even as they roared their battlecry,” and undertakes an ill-advised sword fight with the young warrior Wistan, which (predictably) he loses, it is hard to resist recall-

Angeles Rodenas



ing the solemn absurdities of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

Amnesia, partial or total, has been a prevailing theme in Ishiguro's fiction: the brooding, Kafkaesque *When We Were Orphans* (2000) is narrated by an allegedly celebrated detective named Christopher Banks whose move to England from Shanghai as a young child has permanently unsettled him, as the mysterious loss of both his parents at an even younger age has come to dominate his life, leaving him paralyzed as an adult, deeply repressed and but vaguely aware of how selective his memory is. The yet more Kafkaesque *The Unconsoled* (1995) is told from the point of view of an allegedly famous pianist named Ryder who arrives at a European city to perform a concert but discovers that most of his memory has vanished.

In *The Remains of the Day* the butler-protagonist Stevens represses memory, or denies the significance of what he knows, like the narrator of *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy, a clone whose fate is to provide organs for her "normal" and whose strategy for survival is to try to deny the inevitability of this fate. In *The Buried Giant*, the elderly Axl and Beatrice are afflicted with a form of feeble-mindedness that damages their memories, their sagacity, and their ability to reason and to speak. Nearly everyone suffers a diminution of memory in this primitive culture in which there seems to be no written language, thus no history: "God himself had forgotten much from our pasts."

It is a challenge to follow the adventures of the Briton couple, who speak a stilted, quasi-formal English, like characters in a storybook for children; as a sort of dual protagonist, a husband and wife whose wish is not to be separated from each other, the couple are among Ishiguro's most pallid fictional characters. They are functions of a superficially busy plot meant to be kept at a boil but essentially static beneath. Indeed, their love is based not upon shared memories but forgetfulness and denial: "Could it be our love would never have grown so strong down the years had the mist not robbed us the way it did? Perhaps it allowed old wounds to heal." A wise woman asks Beatrice: "How will you and your husband prove your love for each other when you can't remember the past you've shared?" After the ritual killing of the she-dragon whose breath has assured "forgetfulness"—and the ignorance and solace of not knowing history—the novel ends on an irresolute note as Axl and Beatrice decide to risk permanent separation after all, by agreeing to the demands of a mysterious boatman who insists that he can ferry them to an island only singly, and not together.

Amid much that is generic and blurred there are small, sharply observed marvels in *The Buried Giant*. On a river, Axl sees a sudden flood of pixies rapacious as piranhas swarming over a woman:

A sound made him turn, and he saw at the other end of the boat... the old woman slumped against the bow with pixies—too many to count—swarming over her. At first glance she looked contented, as if being smothered in affection, while the small, scrawny creatures ran through her rags and over her face and shoulders. And now there came more and more out of the river, climbing over the rim of the boat.

The heroic warrior Wistan dispatches a fierce beast:

They might have been gazing at a large skinned animal: an opaque membrane, like the lining of a sheep's stomach, was stretched tightly over the sinews and joints. Swathed as it was now in moon-shadow, the beast appeared roughly the size and shape of a bull, but its head was distinctly wolf-like and of a darker hue.... The jaws were massive, the eyes reptilian.

A half-dead ogre is glimpsed in a muddy ditch: "A large hairless head revolved slowly in the slime, a gaping eye moving with it. Then the mud sucked greedily and the head vanished." Finally seen in her lair, the she-dragon Querig is no figure of terror after all:

As for the dragon, it was hardly clear at first she was alive. Her posture—prone, head twisted to one side, limbs outspread—might easily have resulted from her corpse being hurled into the pit from a height. In fact it took a moment to ascertain this was a dragon at all: she was so emaciated she looked more some worm-like reptile... in the process of dehydrating.... The remnants of her wings were sagging folds of skin that a careless glance might have taken for dead leaves accumulated to either side of her. The head being turned against the grey pebbles, Axl could see only the one eye, which was hooded in the manner of a turtle's, and which opened and closed lethargically....

Gawain explains: "She simply grows old, sir, as we all must do. But she still breathes, and so Merlin's work lingers."

*The Buried Giant* is a novel of ideas in the awkward guise of a picaresque adventure tale, as *Never Let Me Go* is a boldly imagined novel of ideas in the guise of a science-fiction novel, and *When We Were Orphans* is a less satisfying novel of ideas in the guise of a detective novel. In this awkwardness it is not unlike similar idea-driven recent novels by such accomplished writers as Jim Crace (*The Pesthouse*, 2007) and J.M. Coetzee (*The Childhood of Jesus*, 2013), set in unconvincingly imagined postapocalyptic or alternative-world universes in which, to the dismay of readers accustomed to the writers'

usual prose, a kind of faux-naïveté prevails, and characters speak and behave with exasperating simplicity, as if some sort of diminution of intelligence comes inevitably with "genre."

(Notable exceptions are Margaret Atwood, an experienced voyager in science-fiction dystopia, and Cormac McCarthy, whose richly bizarre, Byzantine prose adjusts perfectly to a dystopian future-set novel like *The Road*. Whether Doris Lessing's "space fiction" is a lesser accomplishment than the mainstream, realistic fiction for which she is best known is a debatable subject; many if not most of Lessing's mainstream readers claim to be unable to read her "space fiction.")

The concluding several chapters of *The Buried Giant* are by far the most engaging. Caught up in a single, suspenseful interlude, Axl and Beatrice behave more convincingly, and we are moved by their plight. The Saxon warrior Wistan announces that his slaughter of the she-dragon Querig has not been altruistic but has an ulterior, political motive: the unleashing of a new era of race-hatred and vengeance. As a general amnesia prevailed in the land, Saxons and Britons could live side by side in peace, since each side had forgotten the excesses of the other; but now, Wistan proclaims a terrible prophecy:

The giant [of war], once well buried, now stirs. When soon he rises, as surely he will, the friendly bonds between us will prove as knots young girls make with the stems of small flowers. Men will burn their neighbours' houses by night.

Hang children from trees at dawn. The rivers will stink with corpses bloated from their days of voyaging. And even as they move on, our armies will grow larger, swollen by anger and thirst for vengeance. For you Britons, it'll be as a ball of fire rolls towards you. You'll flee or perish. And country by country, this will become a new land, a Saxon land, with no more trace of your people's time here....

We are made to think of Bosnia, of Rwanda, parts of India, Pakistan, Iraq, and Syria in which, stirred by sectarian leaders, ethnic minorities are set upon by the neighbors with whom they'd been living peacefully for years. In an echo of post-September 11 US foreign policy there is a reasoned defense of the slaughter of civilians, including children, as in a preemptive strike:

Think, sir. Those small Saxon boys you lament would soon have become warriors burning to avenge their fathers fallen today. The small girls soon bearing more in their wombs, and this circle of slaughter would never be broken. Look how deep runs the lust for vengeance!

Will the elderly Briton couple Axl and Beatrice survive the devastation to come? As their friend and companion Wistan is a Saxon warrior, he will not be able to protect them; the most he can do is extend to them the grimest of good wishes that, if they flee at once, they "may yet keep ahead of the slaughter." □

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# Why Pakistan Is Sinking

Ahmed Rashid



Nawaz Sharif, Pakistan's prime minister, Lahore, January 2015

1.

No one should be surprised to read that in Pakistan the army has taken charge, established military courts, derailed democracy, brought television and other media under military control. Nor should one be surprised to learn that foreign policy and national security were being directly run by the army. Many similar situations have occurred in Pakistan since 1958, when the army first came to power in a gradual coup, declared martial law, and ruled for a decade. The country has for years been under partial military rule, outright martial law, or military authority disguised as presidential rule.

But the arrangement that has evolved over the last six months is the strangest so far: the elected government remains in place but has few powers, and no longer rules the country. The media, opposition political parties, Parliament, and the intelligentsia are trying to resist the gradual military takeover but they are weak and ineffectual.

The single worst legacy of military rule since the 1970s, the time of the loss of East Pakistan—now Bangladesh—has been a ruinous foreign policy that has made enemies out of most of Pakistan's neighbors owing to the safe havens that Islamic extremists from these countries have carved out in Pakistan. It is well known that such havens exist in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province and Balochistan, but they are also located in many other parts of the country, from Lahore near the Indian border to the Khyber Pass into Afghanistan.

Because of its fear of India, Pakistan has been turned into a garrison state with a persisting paranoia about being surrounded by hostile countries and dominated by a demanding, belligerent United States. Yet the Pakistani army is the seventh-largest in the world with some 642,000 soldiers, 500,000 reserves, and an arsenal of 120 nuclear weapons.

Still, since September 11, 2001, the army has often been ineffectual. Pakistani extremists have killed up to 30,000 Pakistani civilians and 15,000 members of the Pakistan military. Pakistan is living in the midst of a partially self-created bloodbath of terrorism that is more comparable to Iraq and Nigeria than to India or Bangladesh.

That is one side of the picture. Another, equally true and supported by many, is that between periods of military rule Pakistan has generally declined under incompetent and corrupt elected governments whose politicians

depend on patronage, bribes, and a backward feudal culture to retain their seats in Parliament while making sure that true democratic institutions never take root. Bereft of plausible leaders, the political class has for decades failed to articulate a vision for Pakistan; it has been unable to lift the country from its economic morass, wage its own war against Islamic extremism, and convince the military that coups were no longer necessary because civilians can govern effectively. The army, for its part, has frequently undermined elected governments, thereby rendering military coups that much easier.

Today the army, or so some of its advocates claim, may be about to embark on an altogether different and more productive strategy. It took virtual charge of the government following the appalling Taliban attack on an army school in Peshawar on December 16, 2014, in which 145 students and teachers were killed, many of them the children of soldiers. Pakistani politicians say that the problem of terrorism was created by the military, which tolerated and in some cases supported the Islamist extremists and their allies, and only the military can crush or control them. That is what it is promising to do now.

Any such effort faces a very complex challenge. First, the army has directly supported a variety of violent groups fighting wars in Afghanistan, Kashmir, and Central Asia; it thereby hoped to gain influence in each place. There are also dozens of foreign groups who receive no support from the army but have built up safe havens and sanctuaries in Pakistan as a result of the country being unable to police its borders.

The extremist groups now hiding in Pakistan come from Iran, India, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, China, Russia, Chechnya, and many Arab states. They include al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Uighur East Turkestan Islamic Movement, and the Iranian groups Jundullah and Jaish ul-Adl. This list does not include several Baloch separatist groups fighting for a separate Balochistan homeland. According to estimates by most experts, between one quarter and one third of Pakistan has been turned into “no-go” areas by these groups.

The top military leaders now say that they have gotten the message and they promise to control all such organiza-



General Raheel Sharif, chief of Pakistan's army, Lahore, January 2015

tions. Last year Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif insisted that the Taliban could be appeased by talks. The army's chief, General Raheel Sharif (no relation), disagreed. In June the army, frustrated by the heavy casualties it suffered in fighting with the Pakistani Taliban, forced Prime Minister Sharif to support two major offensives in the North Waziristan and Khyber tribal regions bordering Afghanistan. The army cleared nearly 800,000 civilians from North Waziristan before it began bombing runs. Those offensives against the Pakistani Taliban and others have still not had much success, despite their having killed 1,500 extremists of different nationalities.

The school massacre in Peshawar late last year led General Sharif to demand much greater political support and a more determined pursuit of the war against terrorism from the government. In late December, he presided over a ten-hour meeting with all political parties in which they reached an agreement to reinstate the death sentence for terrorism; to amend the constitution to set up military courts for two years to try terrorists; and to strengthen a centralized national security agency, including all military and civilian intelligence agencies.

Military courts are opposed by many Pakistanis because they have in the past led to the imposition of martial law and have been used to intimidate politicians. However, the criminal justice system has broken down and there has been no attempt by the government or the senior judiciary to carry out reforms or modernize either the decrepit state prosecution service or the methods of police investigation. Judges and lawyers were easily threatened and often killed by terrorists. The military courts will now try some 3,400 suspected terrorists.

A “National Action Plan” to defeat terrorism was also agreed on at the ten-hour meeting. This includes plans to regulate the 20,000 registered and 40,000 unregistered madrasas, or religious schools, where three million children are enrolled. Many of them teach a jihadist curriculum that the army hopes to moderate. The Islamic parties in Parliament—they hold less than 5 percent of the seats—naturally oppose any such move. So far there is no effective program to reeducate the tens of thousands of young radicals and provide them with new skills, new programs of study, and job prospects.

The future of Pakistan hangs in the balance, while its stability remains



Mike King

## BOOKS DISCUSSED IN THIS ARTICLE

**The Struggle for Pakistan: A Muslim Homeland and Global Politics**  
by Ayesha Jalal.  
Belknap Press/Harvard University Press,  
435 pp., \$35.00

**The Army and Democracy: Military Politics in Pakistan**  
by Aqil Shah.  
Harvard University Press,  
399 pp., \$35.00

**Discontent and Its Civilizations: Dispatches from Lahore, New York, and London**  
by Mohsin Hamid.  
Riverhead, 226 pp., \$27.95

**Midnight's Furies: The Deadly Legacy of India's Partition**  
by Nisid Hajari.  
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt,  
311 pp., \$28.00  
(to be published in June 2015)



critical to global security. Two of the important books under review sum up what is at stake.

Aqil Shah writes in *The Army and Democracy: Military Politics in Pakistan*:

The military is at the center of the international community's three most serious and interlinked concerns about Pakistan: the war-prone conflict with India, the jihadi threat, and the security of its nuclear weapons. The army sustains the ruinous security competition with India, directly or indirectly facilitates Islamic extremism and terrorism by harboring militant groups as a tool of foreign policy, and exclusively controls the country's nuclear weapons.

Ayesha Jalal, a much-praised historian of Pakistan, takes a long-term view in *The Struggle for Pakistan*:

The rise of the military to a position of enduring dominance within Pakistan's state structure is the most salient development in the country's history and has deeply influenced its subsequent course.... The suppression of democratic rights during extended periods of military rule wreaked havoc on political processes and the delicate weave of Pakistani society.... An overwhelming fear of continued chaos and violence, if not outright disintegration, has made it difficult to arrive at balanced assessments of a disturbing present in order to plan for the future.

## 2.

The central question is whether the army will seriously confront extremism or whether it will continue to play its familiar double game. That game has meant accepting some of the West's demands to fight terrorism while selectively supporting some militant groups, especially those fighting India. Visiting Islamabad on January 13, US Secretary of State John Kerry made it clear that he wanted concrete reforms and would no longer trust assurances. In the National Action Plan the army and the government jointly articulated for the first time a common program against extremism, but the army has to first confront and get rid of some of its contradictory policies.

For years the military has followed a policy of distinguishing between "good" and "bad" Taliban—the bad being those who attack the army while the good include the Afghan Taliban who kill only Americans or fellow Afghans. General Sharif now repeatedly says that all terrorists will be treated alike. Recently, acting like a de facto foreign minister, he has visited London, Washington, Kabul, Beijing, and the Arabian Gulf states to deliver the same message. This is the closest the army will come to admitting or apologizing for its past policies. No public acknowledgments will be made.

The army leaders have also begun a long-overdue process to improve relations with Afghanistan and gain the trust of its new president, Ashraf Ghani. The Pakistani army is loathed by the Afghans for supporting the Afghan Taliban in the past and allowing

its leader, Mullah Omar, to remain in Pakistan ever since September 11. General Sharif claims that he is now looking at ways to set up talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government, end the Taliban sanctuary in Pakistan, and so end the war in Afghanistan. In return he wants to eliminate the bases that the Pakistani Taliban have set up in Afghanistan.

China, Pakistan's closest ally, is secretly and critically involved in these arrangements. It recently welcomed a Taliban delegation in Beijing and urged its members to open talks with President Ghani. It has also gotten tough with the Pakistani army because hundreds of Chinese Muslims, or Uighurs, are fighting with the Taliban in Afghanistan and launching attacks in China's Xinjiang region.

However, relations with India remain extremely tense—partly because the right-wing government in New Delhi refuses to talk to Pakistan, but largely because many of the most dangerous enemies of the Indian army are established in the Pakistani province of Punjab, which borders on India. According to the Pakistani interior minister, ninety-five groups in the Punjab—many of them armed and trained in the past by the Pakistani army's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)—are determined to wage endless jihad against India and retake the disputed territory of Kashmir.

The largest extremist group, Lashkar-e-Tayyaba (LET), functions like a regular party and its leaders appear on television and organize mass meetings—both would be impossible without the permission of the ISI. Much to

the anger of India and the US, Pakistan has also been procrastinating on the trial of seven senior LET militants accused of planning the attack on Mumbai in 2008 that killed 164 people, including six Americans. Another Punjab-based Sunni extremist group, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, has been killing Shias and non-Muslim minorities in Pakistan, yet its leaders are free.

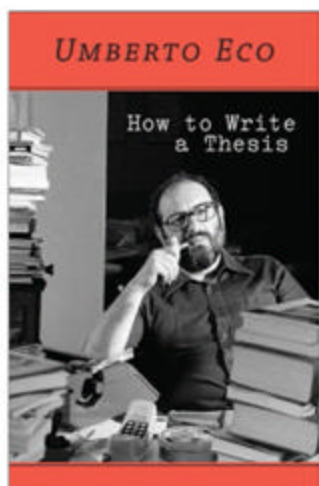
Punjab is the heartland of Pakistan, the source of 70 percent of the army's recruits, but its proximity to India has made it terrorism's front line. In late January as President Obama visited Delhi and US pressure to control jihadists increased, Pakistan imposed a ban on LET. General Sharif's message is that he will deal with the subversive forces in the Punjab, but one target at a time. Many Pakistanis want to believe him.

General Sharif's biggest task is to ensure the loyalty of the army. Rogue Pakistani soldiers have taken part in numerous attacks by the Pakistani Taliban on military targets. Some serving and some retired members of Pakistan's military have given valuable secret information to the Pakistani Taliban. Most of the two dozen convicted terrorists who have been hanged in Pakistan so far were formerly members of the Pakistani military. General Sharif's claims that he will not compromise are being put to a difficult test and it's far from certain he can carry them out.

## 3.

Until the 1980s there was a severe lack of Pakistani scholars writing

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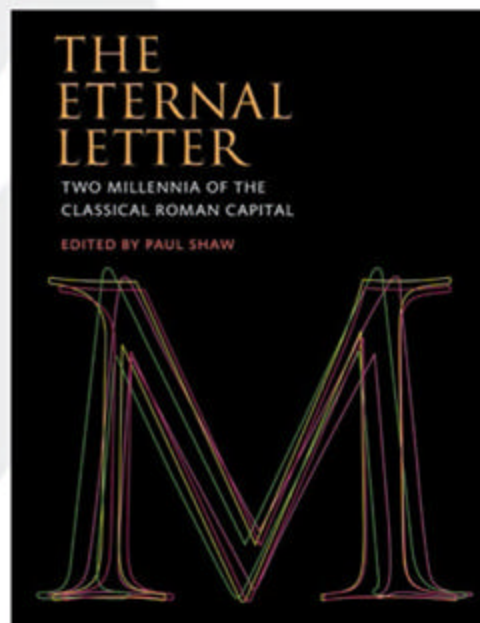
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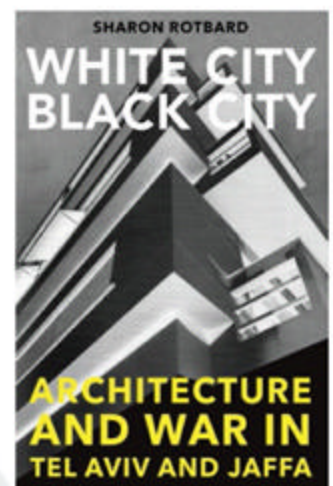
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knowledgeably about their own country. The most widely read authors on Pakistan were foreigners. However, during the past two decades rich, carefully researched, complex, and definitive political histories written by Pakistanis such as Farzana Shaikh, Hussain Haqqani, Hasan-Askari Rizvi, and others have received respectful international attention.

Ayesha Jalal has been one of the first and most reliable political historians. She carried out intensive research to decipher Pakistan's early history in books starting with *The Sole Spokesman* (1985), her account of the founding of Pakistan. Since then she has produced one strong book after another, focusing critically on what she called the "State of Martial Law."

Her latest book both contains new material and sums up her past work. She recently wrote an emotional and deeply moving book on Saadat Hasan Manto, the renowned Urdu fiction writer, who was also her great-uncle.<sup>1</sup> That book seems to have mellowed her, making *The Struggle for Pakistan* her most accessible work to date. It has humor, pathos, gossip, quotations from Urdu poetry, carefully selected photographs, and includes her personal reactions to events. "Forced to imbibe the truths of officialdom," she writes, "many of [Pakistan's] literate citizens have opted for the comforts of ignorance, habits of skepticism, and, most troubling of all, a contagion of belief in conspiracy theories.... Pakistanis today are despondent."

She is especially telling when she points to the lack of serious academic or political debate in Pakistan about the role of the military. She writes of the "institutional imbalances" that have led to this neglect of central issues and "the supremacy of the nonelected over the elected." Such failures, in her view, have been more detrimental to the country than regional and ethnic differences. Nor was the military, as it claimed, intervening to save a broken-down system in 1958. Rather it exploited political differences to its advantage, "with British and American blessings."

However, she writes too briefly about the deep and unquestioned stake of the military in the Pakistani economy, which is now perhaps its most important source of income, power, and longevity. That profitable connection also explains why the army is unwilling to yield to civilian power. It runs banks, industries, vast housing projects, and the largest transport and construction companies in the country. It still does not allow Parliament to make a full disclosure of the annual military budget.

Aqil Shah, a Pakistani scholar currently teaching at Princeton, has also recently published a history of Pakistan, but writes in greater detail about the role of the generals at each stage of every crisis. He points out that both Pakistan's founder, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, and its first prime minister, Liaquat Ali Khan, helped create the specter of an aggressive India that was determined to break up the fledgling state of Pakistan.

<sup>1</sup>*The Pity of Partition: Manto's Life, Times and Work Across the India-Pakistan Divide* (Princeton University Press, 2013); reviewed in these pages by Ian Jack, October 23, 2014.

The first war with India over Kashmir took place in 1948, just a few months after Pakistan gained independence, and had several effects that became critical in future decades. A crash development of military power accounted for 70 percent of total government expenditure during the first three years of Pakistan's existence. Today about one quarter of the annual budget goes to the military. During the 1948 war the government used Pashtun tribal mercenaries to capture part of Kashmir and hold off Indian forces. By the 1980s those mercenaries had become Islamic militants and were taking a serious part in military planning. When General Pervez Musharraf launched the disastrous war in Kargil in Indian Kashmir in 1999, he used paramilitary forces made up of local tribespeople—



Pakistani Shiite Muslims protesting a suicide bomb attack on a Shiite mosque in Peshawar with portraits of the victims, February 20, 2015. At least twenty-three people were killed in the attack on February 13, for which the Taliban claimed responsibility.

much as the Pakistani generals did in the war of 1948.

Finally, according to Shah, the 1948 war affected the political attitudes of the first generation of young Pakistani army officers, who developed a hatred for India, a contempt for civilians, and a firm belief in the superiority of the army, all of which led to the first military coup in 1958. That generation had deep contempt for Bengalis and thus contributed to the loss of East Pakistan in 1971. Shah writes that, paradoxically, the more professional the military became, the more it distanced itself from civilian governments that it considered corrupt and parochial and the more it believed in a centralized authoritarian state, thereby deepening the division between civilians and the military. Shah does not deal adequately with how the army's involvement in Afghanistan over decades, even more than the conflict with India, has radicalized officers and soldiers and Islamized the army's own ideology. Nor does he provide us with a sufficiently close description of how the relationship between the army and the all-powerful Inter-Services Intelligence bureaucracy actually works.

In his most revealing contribution he gives an account of the education of army officers at the National Defense University, the premier university in the country. I lectured there for many years until General Musharraf, the military ruler, had me banned because I opposed his views on foreign policy. Whereas twenty years ago officers heard a variety of views from

a broad spectrum of lecturers, lecturers must now adhere to a single official view on national security. Shah writes that out of a total of 987 hours of instruction, student officers "attend just one two-hour lecture on the constitution of Pakistan by a civilian legal expert."

It is unlikely that the two books I have been describing will be studied at the NDU or will be part of the discussions on national security there. If General Sharif is to truly make a difference in the army and move the country toward a more rational security strategy, his officers should be seriously studying Pakistani history and the economic and political problems facing the country. Civilians should also have a much greater part in creating national security policy.

#### 4.

Pakistan has produced impressive novelists writing in English in recent years. The books of Mohammed Hanif, Kamila Shamsie, Daniyal Mueenuddin, and Nadeem Aslam recall the rise of Indian fiction two decades ago. These writers are young, largely Western-educated, and some live in the West. Yet the continuing crisis in Pakistan and the conflict of the army with civil society has made them take an intense interest in politics and society. Unlike other novelists or their Indian counterparts, they frequently write outspoken newspaper columns. Already a second generation of even younger Pakistani novelists is emerging, such as Saba Imtiaz and Bilal Tanweer, who are equally politically aware.

It is not surprising that Mohsin Hamid, one of the most successful and inventive young novelists, has published a collection of his columns, *Discontent and Its Civilizations: Dispatches from Lahore, New York, and London*, which follows his latest novel, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*.<sup>2</sup> He writes of his marriage and children, his own work as a novelist, and comments on politics, terrorism, and the plight of minorities and women. His self-deprecating and witty tone is utterly engaging.

"The notion that the personal and the political are inescapably intertwined was one I continued to hold strongly,"

<sup>2</sup>Riverhead, 2013; reviewed in these pages by Pankaj Mishra, April 25, 2013.

he writes. In an essay describing sixty years of Pakistan he finds that "we have been our own worst enemies. My wish for our national anniversary is this: that we finally take the knife we have turned too often upon ourselves and place it firmly in its sheath."

Every generation of Indians and Pakistanis should confront a fresh account of the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. In *Midnight's Furies*, Nisid Hajari has provided his own insights into its bloody history. Between one and two million people were killed in ethnic and religious conflict in just a few weeks and some 14 million people were displaced along the India-Pakistan border. There has never been a full and careful account of the tragedy and no monuments to the victims have ever been erected. In Nisid's account we read:

Gangs of killers set whole villages aflame, hacking to death men and children and the aged while carrying off young women to be raped.... Pregnant women had their breasts cut off and babies hacked out of their bellies; infants were found literally roasted on spits.

Hajari's book is a superb and highly readable account of not just the mayhem, but the political machinations that preceded Partition, including the three-way negotiations between Britain and the leaders of what were to become India and Pakistan. He shows how the Indian army was divided into Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs and then divided again between India and Pakistan:

The Indian army, which was to be divided up between the two countries, had trained and fought as one for a century. Top officers... refused to look on one another as potential enemies. Just a few nights earlier both Hindu and Muslim soldiers had linked arms and drunkenly belted out the verses of "Auld Lang Syne" at a farewell party in Delhi.

Field Marshall Sir Claude Auchinleck, who had established a joint border force in Punjab to try to contain the killings, ultimately divided the army with tears in his eyes.

Hajari also sets out to discover how much Partition was responsible for the subsequent mistrust and enormous gulf between India and Pakistan. By, in effect, bringing Partition up to date, his book gains contemporary relevance. As long as India and Pakistan do not learn to live with each other, religious extremists on both sides will always have an excuse to destabilize the fragile status quo. Terrorism can potentially and fatally distort issues of war and peace between two nuclear powers—an unacceptable situation not only for the two peoples but for the world.

If Pakistan is to emerge from its downward trajectory it has to confront the awful realities of the past, the wrong course it has taken, and the question of how a decent future can be achieved. The recent killings in Paris and the public executions carried out by ISIS are intensifying global concerns about terrorism. Pakistan ignored similar warnings after September 11 and continued flirting with extremists. It cannot afford to do so again.

—March 3, 2015



# The Future Is Here

Ligaya Mishan

## The Peripheral

by William Gibson.  
Putnam, 485 pp., \$28.95

William Gibson has spent his career in the shadow of his first novel, *Neuromancer*, which was published in 1984 and greeted as at once a punk revolt against traditional science fiction and a crystallization of the anxieties of the age. The book depicted a future in which identity was dictated by technology, the natural world had been subsumed by cities, and the geographic distinction of borders had given way to a frenetically visual monoculture dominated by the neon ads of multinational corporations.

Critics found resonances with Guy Debord's attack on "mechanical civilizations" and Jean Baudrillard's recently promulgated concept of the hyperreal, particularly in Gibson's forecasting of the Internet—which at the time of his writing was still inchoate, text-based, and the insular preserve of programmers—as a "consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions," with "lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding," and a user experience akin to mysticism, drug use, and sexual release. (It hasn't exactly turned out that way, but Gibson's coinage of the term "cyberspace" lives on.)

*Neuromancer* still has a shimmer, three decades later, but those who celebrate it today, as a cultural landmark or divination, likely don't remember the more eccentric specifics of the plot—the interconnection of voodoo gods and artificial intelligence, for example—which got only more improbable in the book's two sequels. In the 1990s, Gibson began to create characters and skylines less distanced from our own time, occupying an exaggerated, sped-up present. With the turn of the century, he recalibrated again: his most recent books, published after, and directly confronting, September 11, were anchored in a recognizable now. This shift prompted some critics to argue that he had become a realist writer and was accordingly of greater literary interest, as if abandoning science fiction were a sign of evolution.

His new novel, *The Peripheral*, could be read as a rebuff to that notion. On the surface, it is a return to science fiction, taking the form of one of the most traditional of science-fiction narratives, an anthropological account of first contact between cultures. In this case, the encounter is not interplanetary but between two different periods of time. (Gibson has rarely strayed from Earth and its immediate orbit, or entertained the notion of off-world life forms.) The book unfolds in two distinct futures, one approximately a decade or two from ours, the other a century out. In the former, the point of focus is Flynn Fisher, the latest in a line of alliteratively named Gibson heroines dating back to the "street samurai" (i.e., assassin) Molly Millions, first seen in the short story "Johnny Mnemonic" (1981).

Flynn's existence is more constrained than her freewheeling predecessors' and could well be described as peripheral: she's trapped in a dead-end Appalachian town loomed over



William Gibson at the Royal York Hotel, Toronto, January 2012

by global chain stores with names like Hefty Mart (headquartered, it's noted in an aside, in Delhi). Off in the distance, there is still a president, notably female and Hispanic, but locally, little distinguishes the government from the drug cartel. To keep up with her mother's medical prescriptions ("paying the cancer rent"), Flynn pulls shifts at Forever Fab, a 3-D printing outlet that churns out everything from personal drones to the croissant-doughnut hybrids called cronuts that have a cult following even in our reality. (The reference is a small joke, Gibson re-treading a favorite theme, the ever briefer passage of a product from fetish to banality.) The brightest young men have returned from wars overseas with wounds visible and invisible; what little emotional life Flynn allows herself involves mourning the futures they might have had, without being able to picture an alternate one. It's a vision of America not so far removed from our day—the present, congealed.

To supplement their income, Flynn and others in her circle freelance as virtual mercenaries, fighting in a multiplayer online video game on behalf of wealthy enthusiasts, who deploy them like chessmen and bet on the outcome. (In our own time, people have hired stand-ins to play the tedious early rounds of games as a shortcut to higher levels.) To Flynn, her employers are

"rich fucks" who neither "needed the money they won, or cared about what they lost." She suspects that one particular gambler, who plays the game himself instead of outsourcing, gets off on killing her friends because "it really cost them.... People on her squad were feeding their children with what they earned playing, and maybe that was all they had." Her apprehension of class politics is more instinctual than articulated, but it makes her a kind of conscientious objector to her society's general blasé embrace of corruption and violence.

If Flynn is a version of the classic plucky small-town girl whose moral sensibility puts her at odds with her surroundings—complete with a name that has the zing of the comic strip—her counterpart in alternating chapters is the world-weary loner, embodied by Wilf Netherton, publicist and virtuosic liar, alcoholic and "purposeless" malcontent. He is introduced hungover, in an eerily hushed, deserted London that it is immediately apparent belongs to a more technologically advanced era than Flynn's. This is eventually identifiable as the twenty-second century. (Starting a Gibson novel is a bit like sitting down to an uncaptioned film in a foreign language, the expectation being that by the end you will speak it; readers are thrust

into the story, as if in enforced empathy with the characters, both scrambling to figure out what's going on.)

Wilf is more worldly than Flynn, but his world is a shrunken place: 80 percent of the human population has died in a cataclysm called "the jackpot," not a single event but a slow burn over forty years, the collective result of man's impact, simply by existing, on the environment:

Droughts, water shortages, crop failures, honeybees gone like they almost were now, collapse of other keystone species, every last alpha predator gone, antibiotics doing even less than they already did, diseases that were never quite the one big pandemic but big enough to be historic events in themselves. And all of it around people: how people were, how many of them there were, how they'd changed things just by being there.

(Gibson isn't plucking numbers out of the air; the controversial environmental scientist James Lovelock has predicted similarly radical climate change and warned, "There are about 80 percent more people than the world can carry.") Post-jackpot London is run by an alliance between unfathomably wealthy clans that Gibson calls "klepts" and some modern and not entirely benign incarnation of the city's historic trade guilds. When Wilf loses his job, he retreats to the home of his friend Lev, the scion of an old klept and a "manchild of leisure" who has a new hobby: accessing and manipulating a segment of the past, via a mysterious, "massively encrypted" wormhole server.

Gibson has said that he was inspired by the story "Mozart in Mirrorshades" (1985), by Bruce Sterling and Lewis Shiner, in which time travel is used for imperialist ends, to extract mineral resources from the preindustrial past. Sterling and Shiner get around the grandfather paradox—what if a traveler going backward in time accidentally kills his grandfather, thus preventing himself from being born?—by positing that once the present has made contact with a specific moment in the past, that strand of time forks off from recorded history and heads toward an alternate future. This enables the people of the present to keep pillaging different parts of the past, like colonial possessions, without affecting their own history. It's a clever setup, although it is employed by Sterling and Shiner largely for comic effect, with Mozart composing Billboard hits in an eighteenth-century Salzburg whose cobblestones are undercut by oil pipelines.

*The Peripheral* follows this model but has stricter rules. No corporeal time travel is possible, only an exchange of data, including Skype-like communications and financial transfers. How Lev approaches his "stub" of time is not so different from Flynn's employers and their video games; while he takes a paternalistic interest in the lives of the people in it, to him, they aren't fully autonomous or "real." (From a twenty-second-century legal perspective, they aren't: anyone who was alive in Flynn's time is likely long dead in the jackpot



and technically a ghost.) When others in Lev's time start interfering with his stub, it launches a kind of transtemporal Great Game, with opposing sides struggling for dominance, pouring outsized resources and weapons into Flynn's small town. "Imperialism," one of Lev's tech liaisons says blandly. "We're third-worlding alternate continua."

When Flynn and Wilf finally "meet," via a chronologically flexible Facetime, the encounter is played for laughs—Flynn's blunt American talk ("Does a bear shit in the woods?") vs. Wilf's elegant British obfuscations—but it gives Wilf, for apparently the first time in his life, a moral imperative: to try to save Flynn, who's witnessed a murder, from the thugs coming to get her. Inevitably he starts to imagine himself half in love with her. What follows is one of the more oblique and chimerical courtships in recent literary memory, as Wilf escorts Flynn around twenty-second-century London, or more precisely her consciousness, lodged inside a "peripheral," the word for a living mannequin. The peripheral functions like a video-game avatar, except that instead of a graphical representation on a screen it is a corporeal figure in the real world, biologically human, without independent thought. (Gibson is a master of the barbed aside: bespoke peripherals are made by the likes of Hermès and Vuitton, and "Vuitton are always blond.")

As in other Gibson novels, the pulpish plot is the golden thread through a maze of strangeness, cliché as something to cling to in the face of the unknown. The latter includes such

twenty-second-century technological accoutrements as cell phones that are embedded in the body and called into action by the stroke of a tongue. In lieu of computer monitors, a "feed" is opened directly in the eyes—the logical evolution of Google Glass, perhaps. After the ravages of the jackpot, London has been rebuilt by mechanical "assemblers," with cleaned, excavated rivers under glass roofs, forests of "quasi-biological megavolume carbon collectors that look like trees," and a grid of skyscrapers called shards (presumably after the eighty-seven-story Shard tower, finished in 2012 and as of now the tallest building in Western Europe). Department stores have gone the way of most animals, lost in the Anthropocene extinction (a term in current science usage for the depletion of species in the time of man); of the real estate free-for-all that ensued after the winnowing of *Homo sapiens*, Wilf recalls, "Selfridges had actually been a single private residence, briefly."

This is a more complicated scene than the typically conjured postapocalyptic landscape, with bands of survivalists hunkered in the dark, gnawing at raw meat. From the perspective of Flynn's backwater, it doesn't seem such a bad place to be. What's wrong with a world where a portable miniature medical device can cure a hangover and fix a broken collarbone; where manual labor has been handed off to nanobots, enabling lives of leisure; where tattoos fetchingly roam the skin and WiFi connections seemingly never go down? But Wilf is convinced that "some prior order, or perhaps the lack of one, afforded a more authentic exist-

tence." He's fascinated by how "entirely human" the people of Flynn's time are: "Gloriously pre-posthuman. In a state of nature." There's bit of magical "noble savage" thinking here, since Flynn and her friends are almost as far removed from nature as Wilf. At a certain point an old detective who lived through the jackpot tries to disabuse him of his "nostalgia for things you'd never known":

"I personally recall that world, which you can only imagine was preferable to this one," she said. "Eras are conveniences, particularly for those who never experienced them. We carve history from totalities beyond our grasp. Bolt labels on the result."

Gibson is toying with familiar tropes: of a decadent civilization looking back wistfully on an imagined prelapsarian past; of the clash between urban, etiolated aristocrats and country rubes, neither of whom prove to be exactly that.

But Gibson has always been better at exploring ideas than plumbing psychology, at constructing outer worlds than inner ones. His characters tend to function as bundles of nerves, reacting more than reflecting, and his incessant cross-cutting from one to another has often made it difficult for fully developed personalities to emerge. This changed with *Pattern Recognition* (2003), his only novel thus far to stick with a single perspective, that of the "coolhunter" Cayce Pollard, whose slightly fantastical handicap—a physical allergy to logos—was balanced by a convincingly sketched past (she became disoriented and unable to grieve properly after her father's disappearance in the September 11 attacks), and who achieved on the page a rare fidelity to life. Neither Flynn nor Wilf has much by way of personal history to inform who they are; they are intensely creatures of their moment. One could go so far as to say that they aren't characters at all, merely avatars or peripherals for Gibson's own restive consciousness.

*The Peripheral* may be Gibson's bleakest book, for all its glints of humor and feint at a happy ending. In earlier novels, his characters were wildcatters, untethered to the places they found themselves in, ever en route to somewhere else. Flynn and her friends have little sense of the outside world beyond the trickle-down cuisine offered at the local Sushi Barn. Their isolation is as much a matter of class as geography. When, in the thicket of plot, Hefty Mart is acquired by Lev's clan, Flynn marvels: "It was like buying the moon."

Perhaps as a result, the language of the twenty-first-century sections seems stilted. Gibson has often evoked Dashiell Hammett in his characters' speech, but here it's particularly fragmentary and gnostic, almost impoverished, with articles and pronouns often jettisoned entirely, along with self-reflection. (It's typically the "I" that gets lost: "Scares me." "Hurts my eyes." "Haven't slept.") While it's believable that this is how these characters would talk and think (Gibson grew up in Appalachia), I missed the precision and flash of his earlier prose, his fistfuls of sparks—like a throwaway line in *Virtual Light* (1993), describing a woman's hair as "the pelt of some

nocturnal animal that had fed on peroxide and Vaseline"—and his crisp indictments, perhaps never better than in *Pattern Recognition*: "There must be some Tommy Hilfiger event horizon, beyond which it is impossible to be more derivative, more removed from the source, more devoid of soul."

Missing, too, is the kind of shambolic bohemian subculture that Gibson once called "where industrial civilization went to dream. A sort of unconscious R&D, exploring alternate societal strategies." In his previous books, these functioned as refuges for people on the margins, from the secret hacker network in *Idoru* (1996) to the shantytown jury-rigged on an earthquake-damaged bridge in *Virtual Light*.

In *The Peripheral* the sole example of subculture is more gruesome: a neoprimitive cult of self-mutilated cannibals has set up a colony on the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a whirlpool of plastic debris buoyed by the rotating ocean currents of the North Pacific Gyre. The colonists believe they have opted out of the system, when they've merely created "another manifestation of it, but with heritage diseases." Their aggressive body modifications, including "benign skin cancers, supernumerary nipples" and "pseudo-ichthyotic scaling," seem indulgent set against the combat wounds and multiple amputations suffered by soldiers in Flynn's time.

In Gibson's last two novels, *Spook Country* (2007) and *Zero History* (2010), the figure of "the old man" appears, a former intelligence officer who still keeps an eye on the government's machinations. I've always thought of him as Gibson's proxy, a quiet dissident, motivated by "some sort of seething Swiftian rage... that he can only express through perverse, fiendishly complex exploits, resembling Surrealist *gestes*." Like most of Gibson's novels, *The Peripheral* turns frantic toward the end, with a series of increasingly zany thriller scenes; the build to the climax involves a burrito delivered by drone, a corporate merger, and a weaponized pram. This is fodder for Gibson's fans, not those seeking insight, but no Gibson novel would be complete without the moment when "the localized high-pressure zone of weird begins to manifest."

Gibson's early work was dubbed "cyberpunk," a genre that Fredric Jameson declared "the supreme literary expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself." But Gibson himself repudiated the label after it lost its connection to ideas and came to be associated with a deracinated style, all flash and gleaming surfaces. And while *Neuromancer* is still potent, *Pattern Recognition* is arguably his most completely realized novel. Not because it is more "realistic": in fact, it's the way in which Gibson makes the real world seem eerie and alien, simply through a shift in focus, that lends it conviction.

Coming a decade later, *The Peripheral* sometimes has the awkward feel of a transitional work, as if Gibson were trying to adapt to how quickly the present has nearly outstripped his imagined futures. It's tough being an oracle, but that was never what was most interesting about Gibson's work. He is better understood as an interrogator of our own time, ferreting out the strangeness in our everyday and the ways that "the future is already here," as he says—"just not evenly distributed." □

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# Cuba: The New Opening

Enrique Krauze

## Visions of Power in Cuba: Revolution, Redemption, and Resistance, 1959–1971

by Lillian Guerra.

University of North Carolina Press, 467 pp., \$29.95 (paper)

## Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations Between Washington and Havana

by William M. LeoGrande and Peter Kornbluh.

University of North Carolina Press, 524 pp., \$35.00

The history taught in Cuban schools exalts the redeeming function of the Cuban Revolution but it also, for the most part, reduces that revolution to a biography of Fidel Castro. Someday perhaps Cuban schoolchildren will have access to other versions of their history. If that day comes, *Visions of Power in Cuba: Revolution, Redemption, and Resistance, 1959–1971* by Lillian Guerra, an American historian of Cuban descent, should be a required (and saddening) assignment. It tells the story of the construction of the longest dictatorship in Latin American history (and now the longest-lasting continuous regime on earth).

The book is not a conventional political history but rather a social history of the Cuban people subjugated, by choice or by force, to the new system put into place during the 1960s and 1970s. Based on almost twenty years of research in Cuban and American archives like the Cuban Exile Collection and the Cuban Revolution Collection at Yale University, Guerra reconstructs how Fidel Castro went about narrowing the range of civil liberties, autonomous institutions, and finally the society itself, until he completely dominated them.

The revolutionaries came to power on an island where one in six Cubans owned a radio, one in twenty-five a television set. There were 120 newspapers and magazines, like the political journal *Bohemia*, which in the first three weeks of 1959 sold a million copies celebrating the triumph of the revolution. With this impressive island-wide coverage—most of it favoring the revolution—Castro could multiply the effect of his very long speeches, many of them to an audience of a million people acclaiming him with upraised hands. He was the first revolutionary to use television with wide effect.

One of Guerra's revelations is the use Fidel made of religious symbols. As a steady leitmotif he would say things like: "They speak ill of me because I have spoken the truth. They crucified Christ for speaking the truth" or "Whoever condemns a revolution like this one betrays Christ and declares himself capable of crucifying that very Christ once again." Although he had been educated by the Jesuits, Castro had no belief in religious dogmas. Nevertheless he affirmed and imposed his beliefs as if they were in themselves religious dogmas. A new faith, *Fidelismo*, began to form around his person. Drawings were published with Fidel inserted into scenes from the Bible; pilgrimages were conducted to

sacralized sites in the former guerrilla haven of the Sierra Maestra or to the Turquino mountain, which Fidel had once climbed. In a conversation with a journalist from the magazine *Carteles*, an old peasant succinctly expressed his reverence:

*Question:* What do you think of the Agrarian Reform?

*Blanco:* That is a blessing of God.

*Question:* You mean from Fidel, from the Revolution?



Fidel Castro and his brother, President Raúl Castro, during a meeting of Cuba's Communist Party Congress, Havana, April 2011

*Blanco:* I mean from God, through Fidel.

The new faith created its own ample vocabulary. Among its simplest epithets were "traitors" and *vendepatrias* ("sell-outs of the nation"), first applied to those accused of torture and murder in the service of the defeated Batista regime. The executions of such people during Castro's first months in power, under the banner of "Revolutionary justice," had vast popular support. But then Fidel instituted, in his own words, "Revolutionary terror." One of its early victims was the popular revolutionary *comandante* Huber Matos, who was arrested in October 1959 for criticizing the clearly increasing influence of the Cuban Communist Party within the regime. He was sentenced to—and served—twenty years' imprisonment.

Fidel carried out his political moves with the same rapidity. He made himself prime minister, dismissed the idea of elections or the democratic division of powers, installed "true democracy" (voting by a show of hands in the Plaza de la Revolución in Havana), and carried out the first purges among those who had fought for the revolution. As early as March 1959, Raúl Castro contacted Moscow to arrange a Soviet-run training program for the Cuban army and for an organized secret police force, later to be known as G2.

Nonetheless, into the year 1960, Cuba seemed to be (at least in its publicly cited objectives) a radical version of the Mexican Revolution: nationalist,

egalitarian, "humanist," and focused on social justice. In February 1960, a visit to the island by Soviet Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan marked the beginning of a close economic relationship with the Soviet Union, centering around the exchange of sugar for oil, on terms very favorable to Cuba. The economic connection rapidly impelled the spread of Soviet-style state controls over the society and a severe erosion of the market.

All independent newspapers and journals disappeared. One of the saddest episodes was the termination of

Among those numerous groups, perhaps the most disturbing and intimidating entities were the *Comités de Defensa de la Revolución* (CDR). The CDRs recruited volunteers, city block by block, to oversee the revolutionary purity of their neighbors and denounce any deviations. Fidel defined them as "the civil rear guard for the vanguard of the militias and Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) in the struggle against the internal and external enemy," and he added, "it is impossible that the worms and parasites can make their moves if, on their own, the people... keep an eye on them."

In the early 1960s, Cuban cities witnessed an early surge of dissidence in the confrontations between these *Cederistas* and groups or individuals the regime stigmatized as *gusanos* ("worms"). Guerra, using newly discovered material from various archives, vividly reconstructs much of this unrest. The *gusanos* refused to integrate themselves into revolutionary institutions. Yet most of them criticized the CIA-sponsored invasion at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961, and considered the Miami-based exiles to be "servants of the gringos." Nevertheless the CDRs could send them to jail and even (following the Soviet model) to incarceration in psychiatric hospitals where they could be subjected to such measures as electric shock treatments. For their efficiency at forestalling criticism of the revolution, Castro called the *Cederistas* "one million gags," emphasizing that their major effect by far was the stifling of open dissent.

Another significant (and historically obscure) event was the violent opposition of peasants to the collectivization of the land in the provinces of Escambray and Matanzas. Lillian Guerra writes that in Escambray, the CIA was actively involved in encouraging resistance. In the violence known as "*la limpieza* [the cleaning] of Escambray," six thousand people died (combining the losses of the Cuban army and the peasant rebels). In the summer of 1963 the government permanently moved all the male population of Escambray to Pinar del Río and the women and children to the Miramar area of Havana, a total of 35,000 people. Escambray was finally converted into a military zone and a national park. In 2005, for the first time in forty years, Raúl Castro called the Escambray events "a civil war."

Almost simultaneously (and without any CIA intervention, according to Guerra), the peasants of Matanzas also took up arms against the collectivization policy. The guerrillas of Matanzas survived as a group until the beginning of 1963. There were widespread arrests, summary executions, and extensive campaigns of slogans and arguments in favor of the revolution. The Second Agrarian Reform (1963) then put further limits on rural private property and, says Guerra, "the historically exceptional egalitarian model of capitalist agricultural production in Matanzas was forcibly reduced to the Communist norm."

In the mid-1960s, the worldwide youth counterculture arrived, a little belatedly,



in Cuba. With their long hair and sandals, their rock music, their fondness for an anarchic way of life and sexual permissiveness, many young Cubans were culturally rebellious but not in active opposition to the regime. Guerra describes how, in the ephemeral publications associated with the counterculture (like *El Sable* or *El Puente*), critical comments were published on issues that are now—in the era of Raúl—common currency in the official media, including bureaucratic abuses and negligence and the wasting of resources.

Fidel had no patience with what he saw as the lack of revolutionary zeal among the young. The counterculture publications were closed down and many of their contributors sent off to work camps for “reeducation.” And Fidel went so far as to urge young people to report on their parents if they expressed an explicit desire to leave Cuba.

In 1965 Fidel had created the Military Units to Aid Production (UMAP), which were labor camps to which many of these “antisocial” young people and various *gusanos* were sent. (An estimated 35,000 people passed through these camps between 1965 and 1968.) Alongside other inmates were members of Protestant and Afro-Cuban religious sects whom the regime considered unreliable (especially Jehovah’s Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists) and who were submitted to systematic tortures.

Based on a conviction that to be revolutionary one must be “macho,” gay people were sent to the camps and cruelly persecuted. Reinaldo Arenas, the brilliant homosexual writer who left Cuba in 1980, has written an account of his treatment, *Before Night Falls* (1993); but Guerra supplements it with firsthand personal reports. Gays were subjected not only to forced labor but also to painful Pavlovian treatments meant to “cure their illness.” This government-inspired antigay persecution lasted until the beginning of the 1980s.

In 1968—proclaimed “the Year of the Heroic Guerrilla”—58,000 small businesses were expropriated in a matter of days (including street vendors’ kiosks, shoemakers, dressmakers, laundries, beauty shops, nightclubs, etc.). Many of the owners (labeled “petty bourgeois”) were assigned to compulsory labor in agriculture or construction. Now fully in charge of what some critics have called “the island plantation of Fidel” (his father had been the owner of a large hacienda), Castro made one of his many huge economic mistakes. In 1970 he called for “the Sugar Harvest of the Ten Million.” This marked the absolute limit of Che Guevara’s idealistic push for “voluntary labor.” Castro announced that “the honor of the Revolution” was at stake. A student who had taken part remarked to Guerra that they had not harvested sugarcane “for Fidel or his honor.”

Still, the large-scale response revealed Fidel’s still-charismatic capacity to mobilize hundreds of thousands of people from all social and economic levels, but the harvest failed to meet its objectives. Faced with rising absenteeism in the fields (the only option left of the right to strike), he issued a law against vagrancy and further tightened control of the shores of Cuba. Fidel declared that no one any longer wanted to leave the country. And emigration remained illegal until the Mariel Boatlift in 1980.

The definite sign of Cuba’s incorpo-

ration into the Soviet bloc was the show trial (an echo of the Soviet trials in the 1930s) of the poet Heberto Padilla, who had dared to criticize “our miniature version of Stalinism.” Arrested in March 1971, after five weeks in prison and daily interrogations he “confessed” his crimes against the revolution. Many voices of the Latin-American and international literary community recognized a “show trial” and criticized the persecution, including some, such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, who, up to this moment, had always backed Fidel. Castro then gave precise orders banning the books of such authors in Cuba. In the 1960s Padilla had won the national prize for poetry awarded by an international jury. Now the message was definitive, as in Fidel’s words of 1961: “With the Revolution, everything. Against the Revolution, nothing.”

The same slogan still prevails today, though certainly people have more space. The regime now tolerates a limited amount of private economic activity, though with many restrictions. There is some freedom of movement, though Cubans cannot board tourist cruise ships or buy boats. And people are not persecuted for their sexual or religious preferences. Still, limits on political life and civil liberties are essentially the same as in 1971. The government still controls the print media, radio and television, the universities, student movements, and labor unions. In these matters nothing has changed. There is no free access to the Internet and manifestations of dissidence are persecuted. Dissidents are no longer sent to labor camps but in 2014 there were 8,899 short-term politically motivated detentions. “We have a different concept of human rights,” said Josefina Vidal, a diplomat now in charge of relations with the United States, to Roberta Jacobson, the US undersecretary of state for Latin America, at their first meeting in Havana on January 22, 2015.

This is the Cuba with which President Obama, bravely and intelligently, though with considerable political risk, decided to reestablish diplomatic relations in December 2014.

In light of the economic and political history of Cuba, it becomes easier to understand its contentious relationship with the United States, the subject of *Back Channel to Cuba* by William M. LeoGrande and Peter Kornbluh, which explores the mostly secret negotiations over decades between the Cuban and US governments. It is an impressive investigation that appeared only months before the agreements between Raúl Castro and Barack Obama and reads like a fascinating and thorough intellectual introduction to the accords.

The book makes it clear that, during the long period of the Cuban–Soviet alliance, an agreement was practically impossible, though the history of attempts reads like a James Bond novel, and the tireless efforts of some figures to promote a rapprochement did have some positive results on emigration and the freeing of political prisoners. After 1971, when the alliance with Russia was solidified, Cuba adopted much of the ideology, laws, and institutions of the USSR, especially that of a single all-powerful party. Nevertheless, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, apparently on his own, put out some

feelers to Cuba, which were suddenly withdrawn after the announcement that Cuban troops had been dispatched to Angola in 1975.

In 1977, Jimmy Carter (with a cabinet divided between “doves” and “hawks”) made serious attempts to “normalize” relations with Cuba. He began by opening “interest sections” in Washington and Havana, reducing travel restrictions, and halting surveillance flights over the island. In exchange, he secured the freedom of several political prisoners and a measure of Cuban control over the tide of boat people crossing the ninety miles to Florida. But disagreement over the Cuban presence in Angola and Mozambique and the American embargo (first imposed in 1962) frustrated any positive result from the dozens of secret meetings in



Raúl Castro and Barack Obama making their respective announcements about restoring diplomatic relations between Cuba and the US, December 2014

New York, Havana, even in the Mexican city of Cuernavaca. According to LeoGrande and Kornbluh, “Carter aspired to be the first post–Cold War president in an era when the Cold War was not quite over.”

It was quite the opposite with his successor, Ronald Reagan. In March 1981, Reagan’s secretary of state, Alexander Haig, expressed his inclination to “turn that fucking island into a parking lot.” During the eight years of his presidency, Reagan was infuriated with Cuba for its support of independence movements in Africa, the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, and the guerrillas in El Salvador and Guatemala. It was a period of renewed prestige for the Cuban socialist revolution among a new generation of young Latin Americans. Fidel resisted the increasingly active antagonism of the Reagan government, which officially listed Cuba as a terrorist state, tightened the trade embargo, and launched the propaganda station Radio Martí.

Yet even in this administration there were some open channels and some advances on emigration issues, according to LeoGrande and Kornbluh. But after the war in Angola was no longer an issue (it ended by an accord that sealed the victory of the Cuban troops and their allies) and elections were held in Nicaragua and El Salvador (both reverses for Cuban foreign policy), Cuba lost some of the chips it could use in negotiations. When George H.W. Bush became president, he explicitly demanded a change of regime in Cuba.

In 1993, the crisis hit. With 50 percent inflation, a 35 percent decline in

the GDP, and a plunge of 80 percent in the resources available to meet the needs of each Cuban citizen, the country seemed on the verge of collapse. In 1993 the Torricelli Amendment, passed after the fall of the Soviet Union, seemed to herald (and exult over) the approaching end. It prohibited foreign-based subsidiaries of US companies from trading with Cuba, forbade travel to Cuba by US citizens, and no longer permitted remittances to be sent by Cuban-American families to relatives in Cuba.

President Bill Clinton decided to lower the tone of fierce opposition; he increased passenger flights between Havana and Miami. Fidel accepted the repatriation of Cubans with criminal records he had sent to America in 1980 as part of the Mariel Boatlift. And unexpectedly, he asked for direct discussions. In 1994, with the “Crisis of the Boat-People”—the attempt by thousands to emigrate by small boats and rafts—Clinton requested the intervention of President Carlos Salinas of Mexico.

The *Crisis de los Balseros* was resolved in a couple of intense weeks of negotiation. Fidel’s only bargaining chips were his political prisoners, to whom freedom was granted in groups at his discretion, and the threat of unleashed emigration. A Republican Congress voted to turn back the clock with the 1996 Helms-Burton Act, which further strengthened the embargo. Bush the Younger returned to the intransigence of his father but Castro had by then encountered a new ideological and political acolyte and a new Maeccenas in Hugo Chávez, elected president of Venezuela in 1999.

There had been one interesting possibility of rapprochement decades earlier during the presidency of John Kennedy, as reported in LeoGrande and Kornbluh’s fine book. After the Cubans had defeated the invading forces at the Bay of Pigs and Cuba had formally adopted communism in May 1961, Che Guevara sent Kennedy a box of cigars and a letter offering five surprising concessions: payment for nationalized properties, a renunciation of the Cuban alliance with Communist Eastern Europe, and free elections (but only after the revolution had consolidated itself), as well as promises never to attack Guantánamo and to reconsider Cuba’s activities in other Latin American countries.

Later, after the release of the 1,200 prisoners from the invasion force had been negotiated, Fidel expressed (to Tad Szulc of *The New York Times* as well as others) his desire to somehow reestablish connections. One year later, despite the missile crisis in October 1962 and the CIA attempts to assassinate Fidel, the possibility still seemed to exist. “If he kicks out Sovs we can live [with] him,” said a note from the National Security Council. And so argued Lisa Howard, the very active ABC reporter who was close to Fidel. It was a hope also supported by Jean Daniel, the editor of *Le Nouvel Observateur*.

This was one of those moments that might have changed history. “Maybe things are possible with this man,” Castro said to Daniel on November 20, 1963. Daniel had recently visited the White House, and he had been given to understand that relations could improve. Fidel suggested that Kennedy might possibly become “the leader



who may at last understand that there can be coexistence between capitalist and socialists, even in the Americas.” Two days later, when he was informed by telephone that Kennedy had been assassinated, Castro turned to Daniel and said, “This is the end of your mission of peace.”

Today another possible turning point has arisen, for several reasons: the economic crisis in Venezuela, the impoverishment of the Cuban economy, the reduced influence (and changing views) of voters of Cuban origin. (Recent polls show a majority of Florida Cubans favor lifting the embargo.) And the major supporters of mutual enmity have receded from the foreground. There is no doubt that the intransigence of Fidel Castro was a continual obstacle to “normalization.” His fixation on Cuba as David confronting Goliath can be seen as justified in its time and for many years, but no longer. And his definition of Cuban identity as deeply negative (permanent opposition to the United States seen as a continual challenge) impoverishes the rich history of Cuba.

But it can be argued—as LeGrande and Kornbluth observe in their concluding chapter—that the US has been even more intransigent, often failing to act on its promises even when Cuba made significant concessions. It is worth remembering that during the Carter administration, which was perhaps the most open to the possibility of “normalization,” the government refused to open a real crack in the embargo by selling Cuba needed medicines impos-

sible to obtain from any other country. Such an extreme (and cruel) outlook is still alive in some quarters, especially within the Republican Party.

The most sensible voices of the Cuban opposition, on the island and abroad (including some major US businessmen and a few right-wing political figures) welcomed the agreement put forward by Obama in December. They understand and have suffered from the repressive policies of the regime. They know how much effort it will take to pry any fraction of power from forces that have retained it for so long. But they have faith in what Obama has described as a means to “more effectively empower the Cuban people.”

This could result from greater contact with people from abroad whose mere presence in Cuba (not to speak of information, ideas, remittances, investments, and any newly possible business arrangements) will disrupt the long isolation of the island from much of the world. They believe that this new flow of contact will unleash and strengthen a general demand for civil liberties with which the new generations of leadership will finally have to make their compromises. A recent tweet from the blogger Yasnaby Pérez presents photographs of small American and Cuban flags appearing together in the windows of Havana. Perhaps an omen of changes to come.

But the prospects are by no means certain. The road to new relations will be rugged and the process could fail. A troubling signal was Raúl Castro’s recent address at a leadership Conference of CELAC (the Community of Latin American and Caribbean

States), held at the end of January in Costa Rica. He asserted that the possible accord had to meet four criteria: a US return of the Guantánamo naval base, the cessation of American radio and television broadcasts to Cuba (Radio and TV Martí), the end of the trade embargo, and “compensation to the Cuban people for the human and economic damage suffered as a result of American policies.”

The return of Guantánamo may eventually happen but it will be no easy task to achieve it. Cessation of propaganda transmissions would not be difficult but, with the present makeup of Congress, could set off a political confrontation. The end of the embargo—certainly desirable—cannot be done immediately, and the payment of “reparations” is an impossible demand.

Clinging to such requirements (without any substantial concessions on internal political liberty) would seem more appropriate to Fidel than to Raúl, if he truly wishes to move closer to the US and respect the present enthusiasm and hopes of large numbers of Cubans. Dealing with those problems is an issue for private diplomatic discussions. Using a confrontational rhetoric in public (and backing the repeatedly repressive moves by the Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro) only provides ammunition for those who want to continue the embargo. And Cuba could thus abort a golden opportunity for normalizing relations with the US.

This would be a very unfortunate turn of events, because Obama has taken a truly historic step not only in relation to Cuba but also to Latin American anti-Americanism, one of

the most profound and historically justified political passions on the continent. Its contemporary form crystallized during the Spanish-American War of 1898, reached its climax in Cuba in 1959, and has begun to recede, perhaps substantially to disappear, as a result of this possible resumption of American-Cuban diplomatic relations. The next step should be the elimination of the embargo, though a Congress dominated by Republicans will do its best to block such a move.

At the next meeting of the Organization of American States (scheduled for April in Panama) Obama—as a result of this opening—will arrive with a greater moral legitimacy than any twentieth-century American president, even more in this case than FDR. He should use this new prestige to achieve Latin American consensus that Cuba should honor the agreements on human rights that were signed by Raúl at the 2008 summit meeting in Lima of Latin American, Caribbean, and European nations. Cuba must legalize the basic liberties that have been denied, including the freedom to connect to the Internet.

Only then will Cuba be able to turn the page of history. When the virtual shelf is filled with articles and books that have not been allowed to circulate on the island, the Cubans themselves, we may hope, will be able to freely decide whether to absolve or condemn the aged dictator who lives on, mostly in silence, somewhere in Havana. □

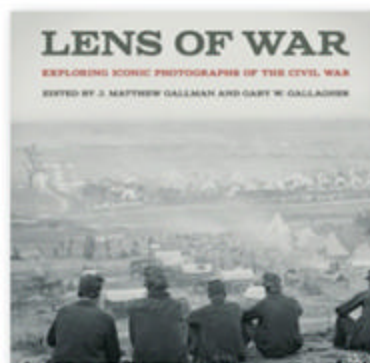
—March 3, 2015;

translated from the Spanish by Hank Heifetz.

This is the second of two articles on Cuba.



## SPRING READS

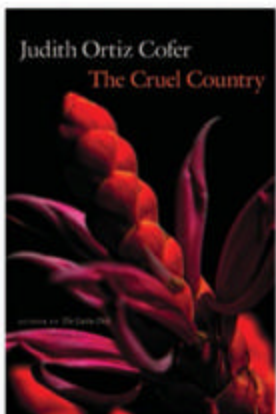


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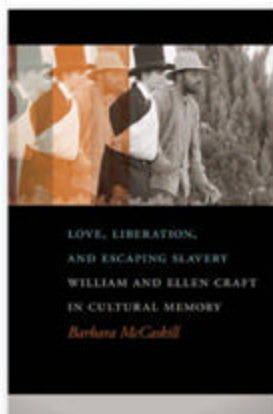
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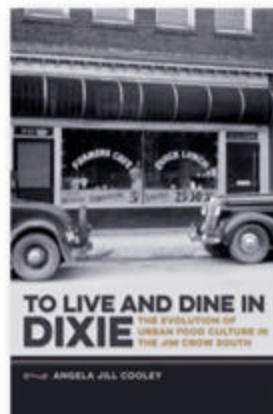
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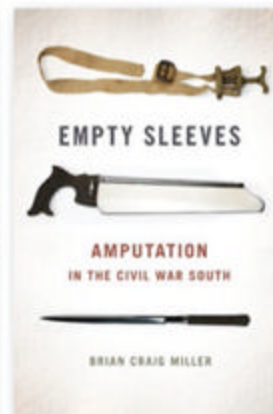
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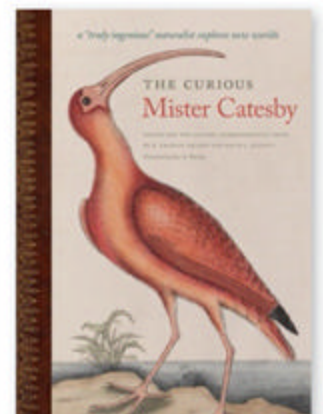


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# Beckett in Love

Fintan O'Toole

## The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume III: 1957–1965

edited and translated from the French by George Craig, and edited by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn, and Lois More Overbeck. Cambridge University Press, 771 pp, \$50.00

The Swiss tennis champion Stan Wawrinka has the words “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better” tattooed in blue ink on the inside of his left forearm. The lachrymose ending of Israel Horovitz’s recent movie *My Old Lady* has Kevin Kline paying his respects at a tombstone on which are engraved the words “If you do not love me I shall not be loved.” The first of these quotations is from Samuel Beckett’s late prose piece *Worstward Ho*, the second from his 1936 poem “Cascaendo.”

In their original contexts, they do not work quite so well as motivational mottoes or sentimental consolations. “Fail better” (which I recently saw on a recruitment advertisement for a financial services company) is followed a few lines later by a reminder that, for Beckett, the phrase is an exhortation, not to keep trying until you succeed but to keep failing until you fail completely: “Fail again. Better again. Or better worse. Fail worse again. Still worse again. Till sick for good. Throw up for good.” This doesn’t quite work on an athlete’s arm. As for “If you do not love me I shall not be loved,” it is quickly followed by another bout of verbal nausea:

*the churn of stale words in the  
heart again  
love love love thud of the old  
plunger  
pestling the unalterable  
whew of words*

We are unlikely to see that on a Valentine’s Day greeting card anytime soon.

Beckett loved tennis and his sense of humor might have been gratified by the joke that contemporary culture is playing on him, making his enactments of futility themselves futile by reading them as cheerleaders’ chants. And he would have recognized the ironies involved in this transformation of wretchedness into celebration, for he faced them in his own lifetime, not least in the years after the utterly unexpected success of *Waiting for Godot* in the mid-1950s, which brought him money and fame. Success was not what Beckett had bargained for: his compact with the Muses stipulated that he must embrace, as his biographer James Knowlson summarizes, “poverty, failure, exile, and loss.” Instead of failing better, he was now succeeding worse.

The feeling of abandonment from which he had written (between 1947 and 1950) *Godot*, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*—the knowledge that no one greatly cared what he wrote or why—was now impossible. In 1948, he could write, with typically self-wounding humor, to his agent George Reavey in London that “I am now retyping, for rejection by the publishers, *Malone Meurt*.” In a revealing

homage to his Paris publisher Jérôme Lindon, appended to a letter of June 1962, Beckett reveals that he was, indeed, on the cusp of abandoning writing altogether before Lindon accepted his great novel *Molloy* for publication in 1950: “It would have taken only this last little no thank you for me finally to see that that was it.”

By 1957, when the third volume of Cambridge’s wonderful edition of his letters begins, Beckett is famous and “these bastards of journalists” and “those bastards of critics” (as he calls them in a letter to Alan Schneider)



Avigdor Arikha: Samuel Beckett au verre de vin, 1969

are working over his case. Beckett was acutely conscious that however much he would “refuse to be involved in exegesis of any kind,” he already had by then a public image. He agonized about becoming, as it were, Beckettian and longed for those days of utter hopelessness and utter freedom. As he wrote to his American publisher Barney Rosset in November 1958:

I feel I’m getting more and more entangled in professionalism and self-exploitation and that it would be really better to stop altogether than to go on with that. What I need is to get back into the state of mind of 1945 when it was write or perish. But I suppose no chance of that.

Three days later he returned to the same theme:

The only chance for me now as a writer is to go into retreat and put a stop to all this fucking élan acquis [momentum] and get back down to the bottom of all the hills again, grimmer hills...[than] in 45 of cherished memory and far less than then to climb with, i.e. nice proportions. It’s not going to be easy, but it’s definitely the only last worth trying to pant as far as I’m concerned. So if all goes well no new work for a long time now, if ever.

He repeated this image of getting “back to nothing again and the bottom

of all the hills again like before *Molloy* or else call it a day” to his radio producer (and subsequently his lover) Barbara Bray a few days later. Later again he writes to Bray, in a beautiful summary of his aesthetic, about trying and failing “to find the rhythm and syntax of extreme weakness, penury perhaps I should say.”

These protestations, admittedly, cannot be taken quite at face value. The joke on his own hopes of failing better in the letters to Rosset—if all goes well,

ing out to the only public lavatory known to me in the West End, viz. in the Piccadilly Underground (it did almost).

The “almost” is as delicious in its comic catastrophe as anything in *Godot*. So is his description to Bray of mundane futility: “I go out to look for something to do in the garden. Yesterday I mowed the grass which did not need to be mown. Perhaps to day with rain threatening I shall water it.” And there is his similar image of himself, written to Jacoba van Velde, as a Sisyphus with a garden spade: “I would like to spend two months in the country digging holes, filling up each one as I go with the earth from the next one.”

He plays up his own bodily afflictions: “I was always a great one for cysts.” He delights in the deadliness of his physician (“You wouldn’t get through one day of his prescription,” he mock-boasts to Bray) and hopes those same afflictions might kill him off: “Perhaps in this way I shall succeed in dying before an operation becomes necessary.” He comes up with a doubly miserable topographical coinage to describe his mood, combining the flatness of the polders—low-lying land—with the becalmed doldrums and claiming to be in “the poldrums.” He imagines a character for his next work: “Says nothing, just howls from time to time.” He pretends to be so fed up with writing that he finds himself “wishing I had complied with my father’s wishes and gone into Guinness’s Brewery.”

These deadpan performances, in which Beckett amuses his friends with jokes on his own reputation for misery, calamity, and pointlessness warn us against reading him too literally when he claims in 1958 to be “in acute crisis about my work.” When, those friends might have asked in return, was he not? How, indeed, could he write without acute crisis? For the other great pleasure of these letters is that we find Beckett sharing his ideas about writing much more openly and with many more confidants than before. This not just a matter of detailed and illuminating instructions about the staging of his plays. It involves, too, a laying out of the truth that despair and darkness are integral to his acts of creation.

There is a magnificent, ten-word summation of how he writes in a letter of 1959 to Nancy Cunard: “Holes in paper open and take me fathoms from anywhere.” He elaborates a little in a letter to Ethna MacCarthy, in which he refers to “the exercise-book that opens like a door and lets me far down into the now friendly dark.” That the dark is indeed his friend tempers somewhat the notion of a crisis in his creativity. We have to remember that Beckett needs the inability to express anything before he can express something. In a letter of 1960 to the Israeli writer Matti Megged, he distinguishes clearly between mundane failure and the aesthetic failure on which he builds his work:

Thus life in failure can hardly be anything but dismal at the best, whereas there is nothing more exciting for the writer, or richer in

Estate of Avigdor Arikha



unexploited expressive possibilities, than the failure to express.

Even with all of these qualifications, there is nonetheless a meaningful sense in which Beckett's work is at a turning point in 1957. Some important things will happen to it and we might look to this third volume of his letters to understand where they come from. In one significant respect, though, we must look in vain. The *Letters of Samuel Beckett* series is a superb achievement of scholarship and publishing, wonderfully presented and richly annotated. As the series goes on, however, and the number of extant letters grows, the process of selection becomes increasingly exclusive—the first volume included 60 percent of the available corpus; the second volume 40 percent; the present one just over 20 percent. Even so, the scope of the volume has had to be limited—it was intended to run up to 1967 but ends in 1965. Its riches of humor, insight, and engagement, and the evident care and integrity of the editors, are such that it seems churlish to point to what it does not contain. But there is a highly significant absence.

The principle of selection for these volumes is that laid down by Beckett himself, who decreed that only those letters “having bearing upon my work” be published. Yet as the editors acknowledge, the distinction between the private man and his public work is “endlessly debatable.” It seems to me that the most debatable decision is the exclusion of letters written by Beckett in 1958 and 1959 to Ethna MacCarthy, the woman he had fallen in love with

in 1922 or 1923 when they were both students at Trinity College Dublin. He adored her, though their relationship was not consummated.

In December 1957, he was devastated to learn that MacCarthy (now married to his old friend Con Leventhal) had been diagnosed with terminal throat cancer. MacCarthy still mattered deeply to him: a year later he flew to Dublin to sit with her for a week as she lay dying. (He writes to Rosset to say that “I have to go to Dublin for a week at least at the beginning of December to see an old friend who is very ill, the usual Irish errand.” But of course this errand was far from usual for Beckett, who had not been to Dublin at all for the previous four years. In the summer of 1957 he had written to Mary Hutchinson: “I can’t think of anything, short of the continuance of some rocks in the mountains, that I want to hear about Dublin.”)

According to James Knowlson’s authorized biography, *Damned to Fame*:

From December [1957] until Ethna’s death eighteen months later, Beckett wrote her long, sometimes very beautiful letters, which can only be described as touching love letters written to someone for whom he had never lost his feelings of deep affection.

These letters contain detailed descriptions of Beckett’s day-to-day life during this period. As he wrote to her, “I suppose the best I have to do is to open for you my little window on my little world.”

Yet only three letters to MacCarthy are included in *The Letters of Samuel*

*Beckett*, two of them written jointly to her and Leventhal, and none matching Knowlson’s description of long and beautiful love letters. The two hints of their emotional importance to Beckett that survive in the published *Letters* are in a quotation in a footnote in which Beckett mentions to her “all that was always and will always be in my heart for you” and the poignant sign-off to a letter to MacCarthy of February 1959: “Je t’embrasse tout doucement tout tendrement.” (I send you a gentle and tender kiss.)

Is it mere curiosity to want to see these letters? Do they have a “bearing upon” Beckett’s work? Emphatically, they do. For just as the death of Beckett’s father in 1933 had a vast impact on his subsequent writing, MacCarthy’s illness and death are surely linked to the way his work changes in the late 1950s.\* This change is his way out of the impasse he was complaining about to Rosset and Bray in 1958. It involves a gradual letting-in of three things he had fought to exclude from his writing—womanliness, memory, and the possibility of love. These are all, surely, connected to the rush of memories of love set off by MacCarthy’s approaching demise.

At its simplest, the big thing that happens to Beckett’s work in the years covered by this volume of letters, 1957 to 1965, is the arrival of female voices. Beckett’s previous world is overwhelmingly male. Women are entirely ab-

\*See my review in these pages of *Echo’s Bones*, edited by Mark Nixon (Grove Press, 2014), March 19, 2015.

sent from *Godot*; when they appear in the novels they are typically either nameless old crones of barely discernible femininity (Lousse in *Molloy* is a “woman of extraordinary flatness” such that the narrator wonders “if she was not a man rather or at least an androgyne”—the flatness being aesthetic as well as physical) or whores with hearts of gold like Celia in *Murphy*.

Yet a female presence gathers force from 1956 and 1957, beginning peripherally if touchingly with Nell in *Endgame*. It becomes much more insistent with the radio play *All That Fall*, dominated by the literally huge figure of Mrs. Rooney. It runs through *Krapp’s Last Tape* and culminates in Beckett’s first stage heroine (the word is not inapt), Winnie in *Happy Days* in 1961. Thereafter, women will hold their own with men in Beckett’s prose and plays (most notably in *Not I*, *Footfalls*, *Rockaby*, and *Ill Seen Ill Said*). Even within the period covered by these letters, Beckett can write, in *Come and Go* (1965), an all-female dramatic trio. This would have been scarcely imaginable ten years before.

It would be crude to suggest that this crucial shift is merely or solely a response to Beckett’s exploration of his feelings for MacCarthy: Nell and Mrs. Rooney predate her illness. But it is obvious that those feelings have a profound effect on the way Beckett allows his female figures to bring into his world memory, erotic desire, even tenderness. Obvious, that is, from *Krapp’s Last Tape* and what Beckett writes about it to his correspondents.

The letters published here reveal that he is deeply conscious that something

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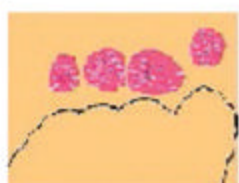
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has happened to his work with this play and that this something is connected to MacCarthy. He tells her, in June 1958, that he has written a "stage monologue" in English "which I think you will like if no one else." Why should she like it? Because it is in broad terms about his feelings for her: Krapp is a writer who has turned away from the possibility of love for the pompous pursuit of his artistic destiny but who keeps returning to an eternally suspended moment in which he and his beloved are together.

He wrote the play quickly in February 1958, after hearing of MacCarthy's illness. He writes to the radio producer Donald McWhinnie on February 25 that "I have an exciting idea for a short stage monologue" before adding, typically, "I know my exciting ideas and how depressing they can become." Yet this caveat does not diminish the force of his excitement—Beckett's enthusiasm for *Krapp* is unique in his published correspondence so far. Later in 1958, he will declare his week in London rehearsing the play with Patrick Magee, for whose voice he wrote it, his "best experience in the theatre ever," a boyish enthusiasm that seems decidedly un-Beckettian. He was acutely conscious of having a motherly anxiety for the play. He writes to Rosset that "I feel as clucky and beady and one-legged and bare-footed about this little text as an old hen with her last chick," and later that "I feel—to a disturbing degree—the strangest of solitudes for this little work."

As Beckett remarked many years later when he directed *Krapp's Last Tape* for the San Quentin Drama Workshop, "a woman's tone goes through the entire play, returning always, a lyrical tone..." That "woman's tone" is the new note in Beckett's work. Beckett, in the published *Letters*, is strongly aware of its novelty. He is anxious about the piece because, for the first time in his work, it approaches a humane gentleness, and he worries, only half-jokingly, whether people will think he is going soft. Writing of *Krapp* as an opener on a double bill with the much bleaker *Endgame*, he describes it to Jacoba van Velde:

It is pleasantly sad and sentimental: a nice little entrée of artichoke hearts, to be followed by the tripe à la shit of Hamm and Clov. People will say, Well, well, he has blood in his veins, who would have thought it, it must be age.

*Krapp's Last Tape* is not in fact sentimental. Beckett guards against that danger by making Krapp a clownish, dirty, decrepit, pathetically failed version of himself had he stayed in Dublin and given up writing before his important work was done. But the play does have new blood in its veins—the blood of memory and grief and love.

In a moving letter to Bray after the death of her estranged husband—surely one of the most beautiful letters of personal condolence on record—he writes of a stillness at the heart of grief and love:

Somewhere at the heart of the gales of grief (and of love too, I've been told) already they have blown themselves out. I was always grateful for that humiliating consciousness and it was always there I huddled, in the innermost place of

human frailty and lowliness. To fly there for me was not to fly far, and I'm not saying this is right for you.

It is this still point at the eye of a storm of grief and love generated by Ethna MacCarthy's dying that Beckett allows into *Krapp's Last Tape* as he has never let it into his work before. It comes in with a culminating lyrical memory of being with her in a boat on a lake, an image of a floating, arrested moment of calm and connection:

We drifted in among the flags and stuck. The way they went down,



Samuel Beckett outside the Royal Court Theatre, London, during rehearsals for his 1979 production of *Happy Days*

sighing, before the stem! [Pause.] I lay down across her with my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side.

This note has been unheard in Beckett before because it is the note of memory. Before this, Beckett's characters do not remember. Memory is mocked—Molloy can't remember his own name or his mother's; Estragon can't remember in the second act of *Godot* what happened the previous day in the first act and he and Vladimir can't remember whether they lived in the Mâcon country or the Cackon country. A typical exchange in *Endgame* is:

*Hamm*: What have you done with your bicycle?

*Clov*: I never had a bicycle.

Even the most banal kinds of memory do not function. But in *Krapp's Last Tape*, memories are stored, recorded, and replayed. This is the beginning of the effort, as Beckett will put it much later in the prose work *Company*, "to have the hearer have a past and acknowledge it." In his next major play, *Happy Days*, Winnie will be able, at a crucial moment, to remember being courted by her husband Willie, and however

ambivalent the memory, it sustains a human connection that gives the play an unexpected tenderness. From here on, remembering becomes a possibility for Beckett's characters and with that possibility he opens up new aesthetic opportunities for lyrical evocation and for the gothic hauntings of the present by the past that shape his late dramas.

Having restored memory, Beckett is also able to make use of his own childhood and youth, not least the trauma of his father's death that he had been avoiding since he wrote *Echo's Bones* in 1933. He does not go soft or become sentimental—memory is terrifying in *Not I* and chillingly ghostly in *Footfalls*.

He does not succumb to the idea of a continuous character, moving steadily from past to present. But he does find ways to use his own life more directly as material for his work and in doing so to give that work a more humane texture in which desire and love, grief and longing are woven into the texture of his darkness.

This is how Beckett goes on. He did not in fact return to the utter abandonment of 1945. How could he with the whirl of friendships, business, travel, stage productions, clamoring publishers, and global fame that is captured so vividly in these letters? The trajectory that would propel him onto tennis player's arms and corporate mottoes was not to be stopped. But if Beckett could not reverse time, he could move back through it in memory. It is deeply touching that the last letter in this utterly engrossing volume is to his oldest Irish friend Thomas MacGreevy, addressee of some of the very earliest letters in the first volume of the series. It is a suggestion for an aid to memory:

Have you been getting on with your memoirs? Did you try the tape-recorder? Will you still let me get you one?

He knew all about tape recorders, having used them in his play to spool his own way back to love and loss. □



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"Truly," Beethoven remarked in 1827, "in Schubert there dwells a divine spark." Franz Schubert himself worshiped the older composer and was a torchbearer at his funeral. In the following year, he asked for one of Beethoven's string quartets to be played at his own sickbed, days, if not hours, before he died at the age of thirty-one. Many of Schubert's works contain homages to Beethoven: the Fate theme of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is the animating motif of Schubert's terrifying song "Der Zwerg" (The Dwarf). His "Auf dem Strom" (On the River, for voice, piano, and horn) takes up the theme of the *Eroica's* death march. And the unusual tempo marking of the first song of the *Winterreise* cycle (*Mässig, in gehender Bewegung*, moderate, at walking pace), written in the year of Beethoven's death, might be seen as a valedictory reference to the latter's piano sonata "Les Adieux" of 1809–1810.

For Schubert's contemporaries, Beethoven was the colossus, a figure whose titanic energy and sublime originality went on to define the cult of the hero-musician in the nineteenth century. His deafness added a strain of tragedy. And Beethoven could look the part, his image in paint, print, and sculpture portraying the rugged aesthetic adventurer. Schubert, on the other hand, was under five feet tall, bespectacled, and pudgy, "looking not like a god of music but like a harried Viennese clerk with a head-cold," as a character in J.M. Coetzee's *Summertime* puts it. His friends called him "Schwammerl," mushroom. When the bodies of the two composers were exhumed in 1863, it was noticed that while Beethoven's skull was thick, with a strong jawbone, Schubert's cranium was possessed of an almost feminine fineness of construction.

The Austrian playwright Franz Grillparzer's epitaph for Schubert, written for the monument that was erected at his grave in the summer of 1830, conveyed the sense that he had died young and, essentially, unfulfilled: "The art of music here entombed a rich possession, but even far fairer hopes." Many of Schubert's greatest pieces were, at that date, unknown or unappreciated. Compared to Beethoven, his longer works were for decades felt to be rambling or lacking in structure. Hubert Parry summed up a long-standing critique in 1893:

[Schubert] had no great talent for self-criticism, and the least possible feeling for abstract design, and balance, and order. . . . In instrumental music he was liable to plunge recklessly, and to let design take its chance.

As different styles of classical music have weakened the hold of the Beethoven model, Schubert's "heavenly length" (Robert Schumann's

phrase for his Ninth Symphony) has come to be better appreciated and better understood, as has his harmonic language. It was the most successful composer of the late twentieth century, Benjamin Britten, who summed up the new appreciation of Schubert, in a lecture he gave on receiving the first Aspen Award in 1964:

It is arguable that the richest and most productive eighteen months in our music history is the time when Beethoven had just died, when the other nineteenth-century



Gustav Klimt: Schubert at the Piano, 1899

giants, Wagner, Verdi and Brahms had not begun; I mean the period in which Franz Schubert wrote the *Winterreise*, the C major Symphony, the last three piano sonatas, the C major String Quintet, as well as a dozen other glorious pieces. The very creation of these works in that space of time seems hardly credible; but the standard of inspiration, of magic, is miraculous and past all explanation.

This sense that at his death Schubert was an incomplete composer stemmed also from his preeminence in two fields of musical composition that lacked the requisite Beethovenian grandeur: song and dance. Beethoven wrote plenty of occasional music, to be sure, which lacked the touch of the sublime. Song was not one of his major interests (though he wrote one masterpiece for voice and piano, the cycle *An die ferne Geliebte*). Schubert, by contrast, wrote song compulsively, and achieved mastery in it as a teenager. It was as a composer of song that he first became famous; and his fecundity and sophistication in that genre, his gift for melody and his grasp of harmonic drama, both inner and outer, in turn lifted its status. If songs like "Die Forelle" (The Trout) or "An die Musik" (To Music) became popular, a cycle like *Winterreise* (Winter Journey)—twenty-four songs for voice and piano, seventy minutes long, profound in its impact on performers and audience alike—underwrote his increasing status as a musical giant.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, because of Schubert, song

had become a musical form to rival the symphony, the string quartet, and the piano sonata. The harmonic experiments of the Second Viennese School, it has been argued, took place in the laboratory of song-writing. In Berlin in the two decades immediately preceding World War I, there was a lieder craze, an epidemic, as the composer Hugo Wolf called it. The Austrian tenor Richard Tauber brought Schubert songs to the cinema in the years before World War II; after it, the German singers Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Elizabeth Schwarzkopf

used the leverage that their recordings afforded to bring lieder recitals to the great concert halls of the world, among them Carnegie Hall, the Royal Festival Hall, even the cavernous spaces of the Royal Albert Hall.

The lied is surely, however, an art form best suited to intimate spaces or, at least, to spaces that can fabricate a sort of intimacy. The retreat from the star lieder recital of the 1960s and 1970s has arguably created a healthier environment for the song recital in places like the Schubertiade in Schwarzenberg, Austria, or London's Wigmore Hall.

It is true that, as the poet of Wolf's *Italian Songbook* teasingly put it, "small things can also delight us" (*Auch kleine Dinge können uns entzücken*). But the lied is more than a bonbon or a frisson. Its aesthetic claims are complex and multifaceted: the response to text, the compression of drama (the thrill of the opera in a matter of minutes), a melodic sweep and harmonic language as worthy of attention and analysis as anything in Western classical music. In this sense the lied is a standing rebuke to classical music's hierarchies, in which the biggest—or most expensive—is best. In instrumental music, it is the symphonic repertoire that draws large audiences and big money; in vocal music, it is the lavish business of opera. On the subject of hierarchy, here is an exchange between the musicologist Hans Keller and his friend Benjamin Britten in 1969: "I shall be as brutally factual as is my wont," wrote Keller.

You have written magnificent pieces lately—works which could only have come from a great com-

poser. But they are, diagnosably, a major composer's minor works. The time has come for a major one.

Too many pieces for children, for small ensemble, or simply uncategorizable theater pieces like the church parable *Curlew River*, too many songs. Britten's reply was bracingly direct; he refused, as an artist, to be constrained by the demands of hierarchy: "I don't know what constitutes a 'major' work," he wrote. There speaks the true Schubertian.

In his book *Why Classical Music Still Matters* (2007), the musicologist and historian Lawrence Kramer, in a chapter called "Love Song and the Heartache of Modern Life," makes a bold connection between Schubert and the modern pop song. At the center of both is the "romantically disappointed protagonist" who comes to take on a privileged role as a "splinter of subjective life." In the prototypical Schubert song, as much as in the pop song, expressive sincerity comes before vocal prowess; authenticity and intimacy are at a premium.

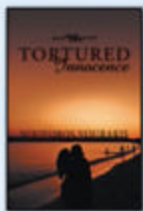
The lineage from Schubert via Cole Porter to Bob Dylan or the Beatles is not a straightforward one, but it was Schubert who more than anyone elaborated this model of vocal music. He gave actual voice to Goethe's solitary vision of lost love in his poem "Erster Verlust" (First Loss), with its words "*Einsam nähr' ich meine Wunde*" (alone I nurture my wound), which he set to music in 1815 at the age of eighteen. We sit and wallow in the pain of the wound, elaborate it through song—at the piano or fastened to the iPod, singing along in a half-voice, repeating the cherished melody. Yet we do not only nourish it, but it nourishes us, creating our sense of self, the modern self.

Graham Johnson, in his monumental three-volume encyclopedia of Schubert's songs, gives "Erster Verlust" (D226 in the catalog compiled by Johnson's most eminent Schubertian predecessor, the German-Jewish exile Otto Eric Deutsch) masterly attention. He points to its concision, as part of an "elite group of single-page Schubertian masterpieces." "Every note," he writes, "every syllable, tells." He goes on to provide a sensitive and detailed analysis of how the music works its magic, the harmonic and melodic bases for the song's inimitable configuration of the ardent, the bittersweet, and the tenacious. A whole armory of detailed effects are woven together in a matter of a couple of minutes. To name only a few, these effects include typically Schubertian ambivalence between major and minor keys; sustained vocal lyricism; and syncopation in the piano. Despite the apparent high Romanticism of the song, Johnson is right to point out its lyrical classicism and affinity with the understated dignity of Gluck.

It is here that Johnson plays one of his trump cards, informing us that the poem was originally an aria, "assigned to the character of the Baroness in Goethe's little-known *Singspiel*, *Die ungleichen Hausgenossen*," whose



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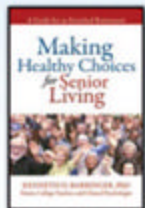
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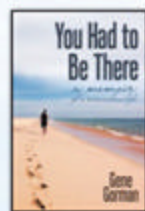
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libretto was at least partly based on Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*. We are reminded in this song of Mozart's Countess, as she recalls happier times with her errant husband in the arias "Dove Sono" and "Porgi Amor." What had seemed an interior monologue, a lyric utterance by a lonely, and presumably, at least primarily, a male voice, is deftly relocated into an operatic scena, and with a different gender as well: it is less a lovestruck metaphysical engagement with subjectivity than the melting rerehearsal of an age-old domestic predicament.

What Johnson offers here is not prescriptive. As a singer, one is endlessly looking for the new and unexpected angle. Here we can reimagine "Erster Verlust" as the dignified but ultimately defeated outpouring of a prototype of the Countess Almaviva, a defeat laconically encoded in the brief piano postlude rather than in the vocal line. This is not directly helpful to the male singer in performance, of course. It does, however, offer a fresh perspective, and the possibility of a renewed engagement; not that it in any way disqualifies the notion of "Erster Verlust" as a vessel of iconic lyric subjectivity.

Schubert's own emotional appropriation of songs confirms this. In a letter of March 1824, deeply depressed by the symptoms and, even more, the treatment for his syphilis, Schubert quoted the words of his first great masterpiece, the words of Gretchen entangled in her passion for Faust—"Meine Ruh' ist hin, mein Herz ist schwer" (my peace is gone, my heart is heavy). In the case of "Erster Verlust," another song that clearly meant much to the composer, Johnson notes Schubert quoting the third and fourth lines in a letter written in September 1824,

evok[ing] memories of a different kind of loss, of a vanished time of "united striving after the highest beauty," of sitting cosily with close friends who shyly shared their latest work with each other while awaiting approval or criticism.

London, not Berlin or Vienna, is today the unlikely capital of art song, with two or three lieder recitals every week of the season at the Wigmore Hall. A large part of the responsibility for this rests with Graham Johnson. With his group the Songmakers' Almanac and its series of inventive dramatic presentations of song through history and literature, he developed a new audience for the genre in the 1970s and 1980s. I heard my first performance of Schubert's cycle *Die schöne Müllerin* (The Beautiful Miller Girl) as part of a Songmakers' event in the early 1980s. With his encyclopedic recorded editions of the song literature on the Hyperion label—French song, Schumann, Brahms, and, most famously, Schubert—he has given the appreciation of lieder, melodies, and art song a new depth and breadth.

Johnson has strong roots in the practices of the past: a protégé of Gerard Moore, the greatest lied pianist from the 1930s to the 1970s; an assistant to Benjamin Britten in the early 1970s; and a trusted friend of and collaborator with the tenor Peter Pears, Britten's partner in some of the greatest recordings of the lied repertoire. He has by now almost single-handedly trans-

formed the fortunes of the lied. Known for his lengthy and scholarly booklet notes for the Schubert edition, he has now taken the material, expanded and rewritten it, and produced what will surely stand as one of the great modern monuments of practical musicology, his vast three-volume encyclopedia, handsomely published by Yale University Press.

That handsomeness is crucial to one of the main and overarching achievements of the project. The book is overflowing with contemporary illustrations drawn from Johnson's own collection of Schubertiana, making the book a unique imaginative resource for the performer or listener who wants to immerse him- or herself in Schubert's



'Encounter between Beethoven and Schubert'; detail of a watercolor painting by Leopold Kupelwieser, nineteenth century

world. We see editions of the poetry that Schubert may himself have used; portraits of the poets; frontispieces of the published songs; and later visual interpretations of the music, ranging from the mid-nineteenth-century sentimental to the uncanniness of the turn of the twentieth. Johnson's entry on "Erster Verlust," for example, is accompanied by the vignette from Czerny's solo piano arrangement of the song (1838–1839), a female figure leaning back pensively on a chaise longue.

Johnson's treatments of the songs can be, as we have seen, revelatory. Take another acknowledged masterpiece, "Sei mir gegrüßt" (I greet you), a song that Richard Wagner considered Schubert's most beautiful. "It moved us to tears," wrote his wife Cosima in her diary entry for January 15, 1875. Here is the first of the five verses, written by Friedrich Rückert in Persian ghazal form:

You who were torn from me and  
my kisses,  
I greet you!  
I kiss you!  
You, whom only my yearning  
greeting can reach,  
I greet you!  
I kiss you!

Johnson worries about the song. He finds it replete with a chromaticism that was to become a Romantic cliché; burdened with a dangerously laborious

tempo marking (*langsam*, slow); endlessly repetitive in its refrain. "We wearily come to the conclusion," Johnson writes, "that this lover is a bore." The solution, for Johnson, is another exercise in scholarly rediscovery. "If we accept the possibility that this poem, from the poet who wrote the *Kinder-totenlieder* [set by Mahler], is an elegy after the death of a loved one, many of the conflicting images become clearer."

Johnson is probably the first to notice that the song is dedicated to the mother of Schubert's close friend Franz von Bruchmann, who had lost her daughter Sybilla in 1820. He illustrates the entry with the vignette that decorates the poem in Rückert's *Östliche Rosen*, a funeral wreath. Rather than a piece

mance available. Schubert's songs are multivalent. That is their strength.

We are doubly aware of this once we begin to consider the vexed relationship between word and music in song. Mahler said it best:

With songs one can express so much more than the words directly say.... The text actually constitutes only a hint of the deeper content that is to be drawn out of it, of the treasure that is to be hauled up.

There will always be so much more at stake in song than the mere setting of words by music. Faithful, responsible setting can issue in limp, drab music (I think particularly of Gerald Finzi's Hardy settings, so literate, so musical, and yet so uninspiring). The best Schubert songs involve bodysnatching, ripping the heart out of a poem and giving it back to us again, transformed. That is why great songs can be made out of even very bad poems; one of the greatest, Schubert's "Der Zwerg," is frightful to read, but powerful to hear, in and through and with its music. And this is not despite the poem: for the poem, with all its patent and latent meanings, with all its consonants and vowel sounds, is a crucial part of the song's success.

Franz Schubert: *The Complete Songs* includes general subject articles on a wide range of topics, from Accompaniment to *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, via Chronology, Dedictees, Friends and Family, Ornamentation, Tonality and Transposition, and a host of others. As a young and headstrong singer, I had my own run-ins with Johnson as pianist over the tempi of some Schubert songs, so his essay on tempo markings is fascinating to read: wise and measured, crucially focused on the intelligibility of text as a factor in choice of tempo. All the same, extremes of tempo, whether slow or fast, can work, in practice if not in theory. To hear and see a master lied singer like Matthias Goerne with his pianist Eric Schneider take over nine minutes to deliver the last song of *Die schöne Müllerin*—Fischer-Dieskau and Moore take six, and the song is marked *mässig* or *moderato*—is to realize that music lives in performance, and that rules are made to be broken.

Every pianist, every singer of Schubert songs, should read Johnson on the use of the pedal. His accounts of Schubert pianists and Schubert singers are generous, his treatment of rubato exemplary. There is even an article on the guitar, which was so often the accompanying instrument in early performances of Schubert's songs, and whose qualities of intimacy and delicacy are sometimes a better match for the early piano than the supersized Steinway of modern times.

Most of the entries in these indispensable volumes are, however, necessarily concerned with the poetic sources, the poetic text, and musical analysis of the resulting song. Johnson provides an incomparable foundation for performance and for listening—for singer, for pianist, and for audience member alike. All the information one could possibly require is gathered in one place. Once prepared, the magic can take over and, in Mahler's words, the treasure can be hauled up, taking us to places poet or composer may never even have dreamed of. □



# Hitler & the Muslims

Steve Coll

**Islam and Nazi Germany's War**  
by David Motadel.  
Belknap Press/Harvard University  
Press, 500 pp., \$35.00

**Atatürk in the Nazi Imagination**  
by Stefan Ihrig.  
Belknap Press/Harvard University  
Press, 311 pp., \$29.95

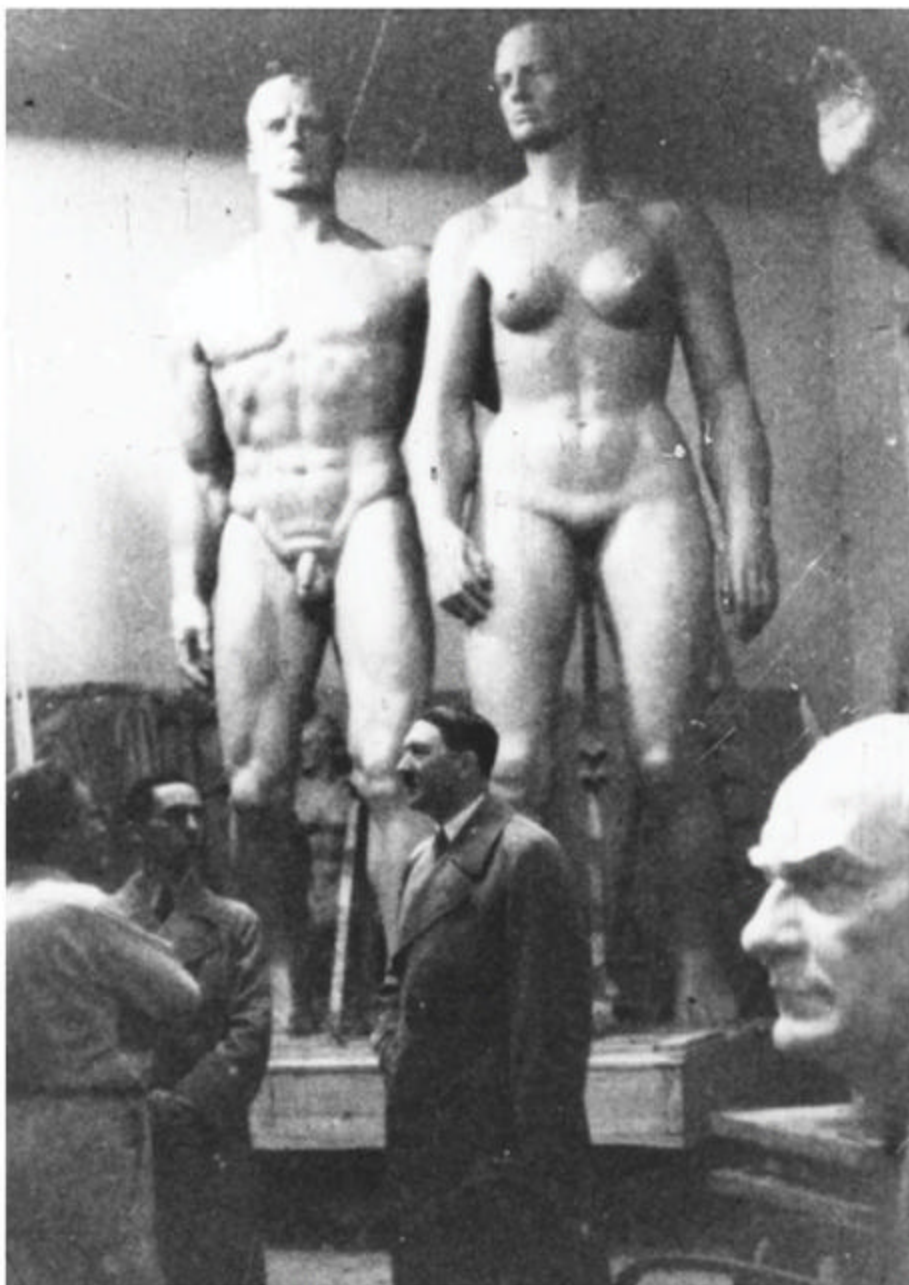
In 1941, a Harvard University anthropology professor named Carleton S. Coon traveled to Morocco, ostensibly to carry out field research. His true mission was to smuggle weapons to anti-German rebels in the Atlas Mountains, on behalf of the Office of Strategic Services, the wartime precursor to the CIA. The following year, as the United States prepared to invade North Africa, Coon and an OSS colleague, Gordon Brown, drafted propaganda pamphlets intended to soften up local reaction to the coming swarms of GIs. They settled on a religious idiom: "Praise be unto the only God.... The American Holy Warriors have arrived... to fight the great Jihad of Freedom." The pamphlet was signed "Roosevelt."

Nazi Germany's leaders also harbored half-baked ideas about messaging to North Africa's Muslims. Heinrich Himmler was the Third Reich's most influential advocate of the instrumental use of Islam in war strategy. In the spring of 1943, as Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's army in North Africa stumbled to defeat, Himmler asked the Reich Security Head Office "to find out which passages of the Qur'an provide Muslims with the basis for the opinion that the Führer has already been forecast in the Qur'an and that he has been authorized to complete the work of the Prophet."

Ernst Kaltenbrunner of the Head Office replied with the disappointing news that the Koran had no suitable passages for such a claim, but he suggested that Hitler might be advertised as "the returned 'Isa (Jesus), who is forecast in the Qur'an and who, similar to the figure of the Knight George, defeats the giant and Jew-King Dajjal at the end of the world." Ultimately, the office printed one million copies of an Arabic-language pamphlet that sought to persuade Muslim Arabs to ally with Germany:

O Arabs, do you see that the time of the Dajjal has come? Do you recognize him, the fat, curly-haired Jew who deceives and rules the whole world and who steals the land of the Arabs?... O Arabs, do you know the servant of God? He [Hitler] has already appeared in the world and already turned his lance against the Dajjal and his allies.... He will kill the Dajjal, as it is written, destroy his places and cast his allies into hell.

Such propaganda "may seem absurd today," writes David Motadel in his comprehensive and discerning history, *Islam and Nazi Germany's War*. And yet one need only review the awkward, cartoonish texts of American propaganda pamphlets dropped



Adolf Hitler in the workshop of the sculptor Josef Thorak, with Thorak's bust of Atatürk behind him, Munich, February 1937

on Afghanistan before the US-led invasion of that country in 2001 or the similarly naive pamphlets dropped on Iraq before the US-led invasion to oust Saddam Hussein in 2003 to recognize that the history of ill-considered Western hypotheses about how to mobilize or co-opt Muslim populations during expeditionary warfare is a long one.

The record of World War II is that the Allied and Axis powers both invested substantially in strategies to win over Muslims and that both succeeded only partially and temporarily. Even these limited achievements were informed by cynical expedience on the part of the invading European forces and the adapting Muslim populations in their way. For many Muslims living in the path of German, Italian, or British tank divisions, after all, the war was best understood as a conflict among colonial oppressors—a war best waited out, to the extent possible.

German strategy for Muslim mobilization remains of special interest in part because the rise of Nazism's ideology of Jewish extermination coincided with Arab nationalist mobilization of anti-Semitism in Palestine. Infamously, Amin al-Husayni, an Arab nationalist whom the British had appointed as the grand mufti of Jerusalem, and whom

Motadel describes as "peacock-like" and "an ardent Jew-hater," accepted refuge in Berlin in late 1941. He met with Hitler and collaborated with Nazi propagandists during the remainder of the war. Nazi messages emphasized that Germany would liberate Muslims from British colonialism and Bolshevik atheism by rooting out the supposed controlling influence of Jews.

These claims certainly found receptive audiences in Palestine and in the wider Arab world. But the extent of Nazi influence on Arab attitudes toward Zionism is impossible to measure, not least because Nazi power in the Arab world proved to be short-lived. "Overall," Motadel judges, "German propaganda failed." Muslims ultimately fought in large numbers for Britain in North Africa and across the Middle East.

There were a few places where Muslims in territories occupied by Germany had to consider how to act amid the gathering Holocaust. In Nazi-occupied areas of the Balkans, some individual Muslims participated in the violence. Some stole copper from the rooftops of abandoned synagogues. Others courageously sought to protect potential pogrom targets. Overall, the role of Muslims in the killing of Jews and Roma, Motadel writes, "cannot be generalized, ranging, as elsewhere,

from collaboration and profiteering to empathy and, in some cases, solidarity with the victims."

Motadel's history is one of two new volumes of scholarship that refresh our understanding of Nazi Germany's involvement with the Middle East and the wider Muslim world. The second, *Atatürk in the Nazi Imagination*, by Stefan Ihrig, a fellow at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, is a thorough and inspired account of how the formation of modern Turkey influenced Hitler and other Nazi ideologists by providing a model of armed resistance to the Versailles Treaty, as well as an imagined example of muscular nationalism for a new century.

Neither Motadel nor Ihrig claims to provide connections to current politics or conflict in the Middle East. That is appropriate, given the character of their scholarship. And yet, during the latest American-led "great Jihad of Freedom" in Iraq and Syria, aimed at suppressing the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, both volumes have implications for understanding current history. Motadel in particular offers a portrait of continuity in the West's strategies for mobilizing Islam in wartime or for using Islam for its geopolitical ends—a history, on the whole, of continual failure.

The aim of *Atatürk in the Nazi Imagination* is to document that the founder of modern Turkey deserves to be remembered as a figure equal to Mussolini in Hitler's early political imagination. Mustafa Kemal Pasha, later glorified as Atatürk, had a record of military action that included cleansing what Hitler believed to be the inherently sapping multiethnicity of the expired Ottoman Empire.

Indeed, in Ihrig's account, apart from Atatürk's personal inspiration, the organized mass killing of Armenians by Turks during World War I—the events now recognized as the Armenian Genocide—explicitly influenced Hitler's thinking about the extermination of Jews as early as the 1920s. Ihrig quotes a multipart essay published in *Heimatland*, an influential Nazi periodical, by Hans Tröbst, who had fought with the Kemalists during what Turks knew as the War of Independence:

The bloodsuckers and parasites on the Turkish national body were Greeks and Armenians. They had to be *eradicated and rendered harmless*; otherwise the whole struggle for freedom would have been put in jeopardy. Gentle measures—that history has always shown—will not do in such cases.... Almost all of those of foreign background in the area of combat had to die; their number is not put too low with 500,000. [emphasis in original]

In incipient Nazi historiography, Ihrig writes, "the 'fact' that the New Turkey was a real and pure *völkisch* state, because no more Greeks or Armenians were left in Anatolia, was stressed time and again, in hundreds



of articles, texts, and speeches.” Of course, the Nazi Holocaust was constructed in its own setting, from its own sources; one should not overemphasize the Armenian precedent, and Ihrig does not. Yet here is a documented example from the early industrialization of ethnic murder in which one campaign of genocide influenced another.

Politically, Atatürk’s success offered a model of how to overcome the humiliation and prostration imposed on World War I’s losers at Versailles. Atatürk not only seized power through bold action in the name of the Turkish nation, he also forced European capitals to renegotiate the terms of the treaty they had imposed. This example, at least as much as Benito Mussolini’s March on Rome in late 1922, inspired Hitler’s failed Munich putsch of 1923. Afterward, in testimony at his trial, Hitler spoke of how Atatürk’s cleansing nationalism had carried the Turkish leader to power righteously: “Not from the rotten center, from Constantinople, could salvation come,” Hitler said. “The city was, just as in our case, contaminated by democratic-pacifistic, internationalized people, who were no longer able to do what is necessary. It could only come from the farmer’s country.”

Ihrig’s book is illustrated with haunting political cartoons about Turkey’s example excavated from Nazi and other Weimar newspapers. The images make the point Ihrig intends, namely, that there can be no doubt about the significance of Atatürk’s inspiration in Nazi circles. They also remind us, as archival texts alone could not, how dark and threatening the German political imagination became after Versailles. Atatürk died in 1938, but Hitler’s admiration of him persisted until the Führer’s final days; he cherished a bust of Atatürk fashioned by the Nazi sculptor Josef Thorak.

Ihrig’s research supports Motadel’s conclusion that Nazi alliances with Islam should be understood as primarily instrumental, not ideological. Atatürk was an ardent secularist. Nazi writing that praised his purging of Ottoman weakness described the Islamic faith as “the great retarder, which prevented all progress.” This line of propaganda competed with another, however: that Muslims were Nazi Germany’s natural allies against Jews, Britain, and the Soviet Union. The contradiction is explained by two factors, as Motadel’s volume makes clear. One is that Hitler was a deeply confused thinker. The second is that Germany’s use of Islam during the Nazi period owed less to Hitler’s strategizing than to the legacy of imperial Germany’s use of armed jihadists to undermine its European enemies.

At the outbreak of World War I, German intelligence studied how best to stir Islamic revolts against Britain from India to Egypt. At German urging, in Constantinople, the Ottoman sultan, Mehmed V, issued fatwas calling on all of the world’s Muslims to rise up against the Entente powers. The sultan assured those who might fall to British rifles that they would be glorious martyrs. In Berlin, the Intelligence Office for the Orient sought to foment jihad in as much enemy imperial territory as possible.

Max von Oppenheim, the office leader, outlined the campaign in a 136-page paper entitled “Memorandum

on the Revolutionizing of the Islamic Territories of Our Enemies.” His staff included a “vast” number of “academic experts, diplomats, military officials, and Muslim collaborators,” Motadel writes. Their incitements “caused no end of trouble,” a French army report noted during the war, and yet, Motadel concludes, the entire German effort was founded on “a misconception.” It assumed that there was fertile ground for a pan-Islamic revolt when there was none, and it failed to disguise Germany’s self-interested manipulations. “The Muslim world was far too heterogeneous” to respond to a single blueprint for revolt, and in any event, “it was all too clear that Muslims were being employed for the strategic purposes of the Central Powers, not for a truly religious cause.”

None of this stopped von Oppenheim and other Foreign Office officials who oversaw the campaign from advocating for its revival as Hitler launched another great war. In Hitler and Himmler, particularly, the advocates found receptive listeners. The record of Hitler’s private reflections on Islam is thin, drawn principally from the postwar memories of former intimates and colleagues. Yet he does seem to have been fascinated by Muslim faith and history. He reportedly described Islam as a more muscular belief system than Christianity and thus better suited for the Germany he wished to build.

According to Albert Speer, Hitler once offered a remarkable counterfactual history of Europe. He speculated about what might have been if the Muslim forces that invaded France during the eighth century had prevailed against their Frankish enemies at the Battle of Tours. “Hitler said that the conquering Arabs, because of their racial inferiority, would in the long run have been unable to contend with the harsher climate” of Northern Europe. Therefore, “ultimately not Arabs but Islamized Germans could have stood at the head of this Mohammedan Empire.”

Speer quoted Hitler expressing his enthusiasm about such an alternative inheritance: “You see, it’s been our misfortune to have the wrong religion. . . . The Mohammedan religion. . . would have been much more compatible with us than Christianity. Why did it have to be Christianity with its meekness and flabbiness?”

There are other accounts of Hitler expressing similar views. Eva Braun’s sister, Ilse, recorded that during his table talks, Hitler often discussed Islam and “repeatedly compared Islam with Christianity in order to devalue the latter, especially Catholicism,” in Motadel’s summary. “In contrast to Islam, which he portrayed as a strong and practical faith, he described Christianity as a soft, artificial, weak religion of suffering.”

Himmler’s fascination with Islam is more fully documented. His opinions ran along similar lines. Felix Kersten, Himmler’s doctor, wrote an entire chapter of his memoirs about his patient’s enthrallment with Islam and with the Prophet Muhammad. According to Kersten, Rudolf Hess introduced

Himmler to the Koran, which Himmler sometimes kept at his bedside. He reportedly regarded the Prophet as one of history’s greatest men.

Himmler left the Catholic Church in 1936, and as the war later raged he sometimes reflected on Islam’s supposed advantages in motivating soldiers. “Mohammed knew that most people are terribly cowardly and stupid,” he told Kersten in 1942.

That is why he promised every warrior who fights courageously and falls in battle two [sic] beautiful women. . . . You may call this primi-



*A parade celebrating the end of Ramadan in Kislovodsk, Caucasus, with Muslims who had joined the German army during the invasion of the USSR passing in front of a poster of Hitler, October 1942*

tive and laugh about it. . . but it is based on deeper wisdom. A religion must speak a man’s language.

These reflections have a crackpot quality, as did much of the rest of Himmler’s thinking about the spiritual world, which included an interest in mysticism and the occult. It is, of course, no reflection on the Islamic faith that Himmler read its sacred text so shallowly or that he subscribed to the hoary cliché about Islam’s supposed martial character.

In recent years, writers such as the late Christopher Hitchens, a self-professed atheist, have introduced the neologism “Islamofascism” into popular use, while arguing that there are parallels between certain radical Muslim ideas about political economy and those of fascism. Outside of a few Fox News demagogues, the idea never took hold even on the right because it is so obviously oversimplified and ahistorical. It is true that Himmler distributed SS talking points arguing that “Islam and National Socialism have common enemies and also overlap in belief.” Yet this sort of propaganda arose mainly from cynicism.

Himmler’s public remarks about Islam made plain that his purpose was manipulative—part of a desperate ef-

fort, particularly toward the end of the war, to enlist Muslim troops to help forestall the Red Army’s counteroffensive. Himmler recruited, trained, and deployed exclusively Muslim SS divisions initially to bolster the Nazi occupation of the Balkans and the Caucasus, and then, after 1944, to try to reverse the losing course of the war. He once remarked:

I must say, I don’t have anything against Islam because it educates men. . . for me and promises them paradise when they have fought and been killed in battle. A practical and attractive religion for soldiers!

The essential instrumentality of Nazi attitudes toward Islam can be seen as well in the bizarre lengths to which Nazi propagandists went to amend Nazi racial policies in order to avoid offending potential wartime allies among Turks, Arabs, and Iranians. Privately, Hitler viewed these peoples as racially inferior. Publicly, he interpreted Nazism’s race theories to rationalize his military alliances.

“While the exclusion from racial discrimination could be backed by some race theory with regard to Persians and Turks,” Motadel writes, “the case of the Arabs was more problematic, as they were seen by most racial ideologues as ‘Semites.’” Yet Nazi officials were well aware early on that if they expected to challenge France and Britain militarily, they had to avoid offense to such Semites. “As early as 1935, the Propaganda Ministry therefore instructed the press to avoid the terms ‘anti-Semitic’ and ‘anti-Semitism’ and to use words like ‘anti-Jewish’ instead.” When German forces rolled into Bosnia in 1943, the SS ruled that the region’s Muslims were “racially valuable peoples of Europe.” They became the first non-Germans inducted into the Waffen-SS.

During Germany’s invasion of the Caucasus and Crimea, the Wehrmacht’s initial efforts to revive Islamic culture, in order to undermine the Soviet Union, did have some success. Bolshevism’s repression of Islamic rituals and institutions was less than a generation old. When they arrived in the North Caucasus, Wehrmacht officers carefully staged the reopening of mosques and religious foundations and the reestablishment of religious holidays and celebrations. They allowed displays of Arabic and Koranic script in public, both of which the Soviets had banned. Some Muslim and community leaders in the East embraced German occupation as a way to restore their culture. Up to 20,000 Crimean Tatars fought Soviet forces in purely Muslim formations incorporated into the German 11th Army.

These soldiers and many other Muslims who cooperated with Germany paid a terrible price after its defeat. Stalin deported the Muslim populations of the Caucasus and Crimea to Central Asia and elsewhere. By agreeing to repatriate former Soviet citizens at Yalta, Britain and the United States became complicit in this horror. Brit-



ish and American soldiers detained former Muslim SS soldiers in special camps and turned the veterans and various Caucasian civilian refugees over to the Red Army in the summer of 1945. As Motadel recounts, some of these traditions produced “dramatic scenes.”

Dozens jumped from moving trains. As they docked in Odessa, many others leaped from the deportation ships into the Black Sea; some committed suicide. One of the imams died in an act of self-immolation. In the Soviet Union many were massacred by Soviet cadres or deported to gulags.... Protests by the Red Cross made no impression on British and US authorities. The international press also showed little interest.

Such was the coda to Nazi Germany’s wartime engagement with Islam: a strategy born in cynicism, and fostered with the promotion of anti-Semitism, ended in mass civilian death and suffering among Muslims.

Nazi strategy left another legacy: it suggested a model for the United States during the cold war. In partnership with Saudi Arabia after the war, American strategists considered how a mobilized Islam might counter Soviet expansion in the Middle East. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, President Jimmy Carter authorized the CIA to provide covert aid to Afghan rebels—a revival, in effect, of the OSS’s “Jihad of Freedom.”

William Casey, President Reagan’s first CIA director, embraced the covert action program and took it further. He authorized printing Korans in the Uzbek language, so they could be smuggled by rebels across the Afghan border and distributed to Soviet citizens. Casey also authorized or at least turned a blind eye to guerrilla raids on Soviet territory carried out by rebels loyal to the Afghan Islamist Gulbuddin

Hekmatyar. (Hekmatyar, who received arms from the CIA, is still fighting in Afghanistan against the Afghan government and the United States.)

The anti-Soviet rebellion offers one of the few cases in history where the external rousing of Muslim fighters against a non-Muslim occupying power succeeded, at least militarily. Of course, that was primarily because the Afghan resistance was indigenous and well underway before the United States and Saudi Arabia arrived to stoke it with dollars and sophisticated arms. The outcomes of American intervention in Afghanistan against the Soviets included a devastating civil war and the birth of al-Qaeda. The policy therefore can hardly be judged a strategic triumph.

Still, as in Berlin between the wars, failure has proven no deterrent to persistence in Washington, where Pentagon planners continue to act as if they can win wars in the Middle East by deftly manipulating and arming tribes, sects, and Islamic leaders in scattered territories they barely know.

Motadel’s sophisticated narrative suggests at least two reasons why such Western strategies typically fail. One is the planners’ ignorance of Islam’s diversity and of the subtle part that faith plays in the daily lives of so many self-identified Muslims. That is, Westerners often overestimate Islam’s coherence and thus its pliability.

The second reason is written across the vast history of colonial and post-colonial European and American interventions in Muslim territories, from the two world wars to the three Gulf wars and now to the campaign against the Islamic State. Muslim populations called to arms by Washington, London, or Berlin on the grounds of common enemies and common interests have heard it all before. They have seen countless promises betrayed and one traumatic outcome of Western intervention after another. It is little wonder that so many find the summons to alliance unconvincing. □

## X, a C.V.

I stand, legs astride, a colossus—  
or dancer in fifth position, wide *port de bras*.  
Polymorph strayed into English,

sometimes pronounced like Americans’ z,  
in French I’m often silent; in Pirahã the glottal stop;  
a fricative in Somali.

Vector, Cartesian axis,  
chromosome, bowling-strike. Pirate-map cynosure;  
at a letter’s close, a kiss.

I do plebeian duty in tic-tac-toe,  
range marble façades. Paired with y, I dodge—  
variable incognito.

I lend myself to comets of cryptic orbit,  
ally with rays that pierce time’s edge.  
I’m default sci-fi planets.

In my Roman hours,  
I was ten. —Later, the name of millions:  
those never granted an alphabet’s power.

—Elise Partridge

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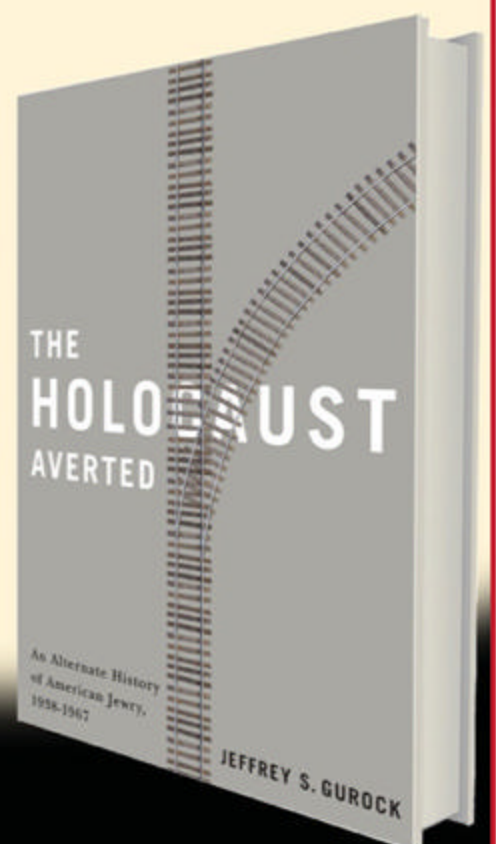
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Penguin Classics, 884 pp.,  
\$25.00 (paper)

It would be hard to think of a novel, certainly such a long and unfailingly lively novel, that has more instances of psychosomatic malaise, more accounts of attempted suicide, than Ippolito Nievo's Risorgimento classic *Confessions of an Italian* (originally published in 1867 and only this year available unabridged in English). To understand the place of those illnesses and moments of desperation in the overall arc of this 860-page masterpiece is to get close to the spirit that drove the campaign for the unification of Italy. Behind it all lies the intuition that for the modern individual there can be no free and fulfilled personal life until there is a free and self-governing nation in which to live. Personal happiness is profoundly conditioned by the social and political surroundings.

The novel was published posthumously. Born to wealthy parents in Padua in 1831, the same year that patriot Giuseppe Mazzini established his revolutionary independence movement Young Italy, Nievo was among the legendary Mille, the thousand Red Shirts, who in 1860 set sail from Genoa with Giuseppe Garibaldi to "liberate" Sicily from the Bourbon king of Naples. Having survived the initial battles that led, against all odds, to the capture of Palermo, he was appointed administrator of the campaign's finances and remained in the Sicilian capital while the fighting moved on to the mainland. But the following March, with most of the country already effectively unified after Garibaldi's now much larger army in the south had linked up with Piedmontese troops descending from the north, Nievo was obliged to take his account books to Turin to defend himself and his comrades from charges of corruption. Crossing from Palermo to Naples, his ship sunk in bad weather and was lost without a trace. No body or relic was ever recovered.

*Confessions of an Italian* had been written at extraordinary speed during a period of intense fervor and frustration in 1858. Nievo was twenty-seven. The dramatic uprisings of the previous decade, against Austrian rule in northern Italy and papal rule in Rome, had all collapsed very quickly and the reinstated status quo was more determined than ever to resist the patriotic tide. Further attempts at revolution during the 1850s were easily and brutally crushed.

As an adolescent, Nievo had been on the margin of events in his hometown of Mantua in 1848 and Florence in 1849, then more actively involved in an uprising in Livorno, again in 1849. Like many patriots he was repeatedly forced to leave town and university to avoid trouble with the authorities, a situation that reinforced rather than weakened Risorgimento sentiment as liberals from all over Italy met and got to know one another and the country. "It's because of these wanderings of mine that I have been putting together

my own particular idea of a homeland," Nievo wrote.

Having finally graduated with a law degree in Padua in 1855, Nievo resisted his father's attempts to settle him in legal practice in Mantua. What interested him were poetry, journalism, narrative, patriotism, and women. He published verses, articles, and novellas, all galvanized by the perceived need to bring Italians to consciousness of themselves at every social level so that they could put the failures of 1848 behind them and at last throw off the shackles of foreign domination. The project was very much part of a young man's desire to take control of his destiny and be free, free to say what he wanted, take part in public life as he wanted, love whom he wanted, courageously, without fear.

In 1856 one of his novellas led to a charge of defaming the Austrian police. Tried in Milan, Nievo escaped with a fine, but while staying in the city he fell in love with his cousin's wife, Bice Melzi. All too soon the whole Nievo family would be aware of this love, which Bice reciprocated, but which, given the conventions of the time, had no future. Like the political situation, Nievo's private life was now stalled; everything was intense, exciting, and desperately frustrating. To escape the impasse, he was eager to enroll in any patriotic uprising and fight. But when a revolutionary expedition to the south in 1857 proved a complete fiasco, with almost all participants massacred and no welcoming response from the local people, the entire Risorgimento movement was shaken. Nievo retired to a family castle near Udine, northeast of Venice, and began to write at a feverish speed.

*Confessions of an Italian* was then a more provocative title than it seems today. Since there was as yet no nation of Italy, to declare oneself Italian, rather than Venetian, Milanese, or Neapolitan, was very likely to declare oneself a patriot—this in an atmosphere where to show an Italian tricolor in the street was to risk prison or exile. Nievo's novel was turned down in his lifetime for its incendiary content. When it was published in 1867 the title was changed to *Confessions of an Octogenarian*. Even with the unification of Italy all but complete, publishers were anxious to draw attention away from the novel's torrid politics.

But why would an Italian patriot need to be making confessions, and why would the twenty-seven-year-old Nievo have chosen to write them in

the voice of a man in his eighties? Nievo's mother, Adele Marin, came from an illustrious Venetian family that for centuries had enjoyed the right to take part in electing Venice's doge. Her father, Carlo Marin, whom Nievo grew very close to in his teens, had been present at the last panicky council of Venetian patricians in 1797 that gutlessly surrendered to the advancing French "revolutionary army," marking the end of a republic that lasted eleven hundred years. By giving his hero



Ippolito Nievo, circa 1860

and narrator, Carlo Altoviti, a lifespan that went from his grandfather's time to his own, Nievo was proposing to cover the entire Risorgimento period from the Napoleonic wars to the present in a single life. The ambition is clear from the opening sentence:

I was born a Venetian on 18 October 1775, the day of Saint Luke of the Gospel, and by God's grace I shall die an Italian, whenever that Providence that so mysteriously governs the world deems it right.

What this would-be Italian had to confess, however, was that that transition from local to national, from subjugation to independence, was still by no means assured, and that the impulses that drove patriotism were not always impeccable. Nor were future Italians particularly admirable or even perhaps capable of the freedom that independence would bring.

Few books, in fact, dramatize as engagingly as *Confessions* the collective flaws that still dog Italian public life today. A centuries-long political vacuum, the narrator reflects, in a divided country under Spanish, French, and Austrian rule, had led people to believe that "they had been put in this world as spectators, not actors." The result was a "sheep-like flock of men without faith, strength or illusions who reached the threshold of life already half dead, then wallowed in pleasures and oblivion until death." Those who might have had the intellectual resources to lead others retired fearfully to their libraries to "dig up ancient inscriptions and broken stones"; others joined the priesthood for "an easy, untroubled life." In general, "blind obedience" went hand in hand with "little regard for honesty and liberty," while the majority were so intimidated that Carlo often thinks of himself as "a man in [the] company of rabbits." It is pointless, he concludes, "to beg for liberty" if one's "soul [is] servile."

But this is to rush ahead. The cleverness of Nievo's novel is that its political content arises naturally from a colorful cast of characters brought together in dense dramatic plotting delivered in a style that oscillates between the realism of William Thackeray and the playful vagary of Laurence Sterne, two of Nievo's favorite authors. So although the tale is told in the first person, its narrator Carlo nevertheless has access to all the characters' intentions and is privy to events he couldn't have witnessed, while the action constantly shifts from encounters with historical figures to gritty realism, excited romanticism, and pantomime whimsy. One scene in particular, where Carlo runs into Napoleon's army in the small town of Portogruaro and, merely because he is on horseback, finds himself leading a revolutionary mob and spouting a rhetoric of political liberty that is in the air rather than in his head, seems worthy of Swift's Gulliver.

The story begins in the very castle Nievo was writing in. Abandoned by his disgraced parents, the infant Carlo lives with his uncle, the Count of Fratta; but far from giving him equal status with their own three children, the count and countess treat the boy as the lowliest of the servants. He lives and sleeps in the kitchen, where his main duty is to turn the spit over the fire:

The kitchen at Fratta was a huge space with an undefined number of

Musei Civici, Milan



walls each a very different dimension from the others; it rose toward the sky like a dome and plunged into the earth like an abyss; it was dark, nay, black with ancient soot from which glittered like so many diabolical eyes the bottoms of casseroles, roasting tins and carafes hung on their nails; it was cluttered everywhere with huge credenzas and giant cupboards and endlessly long tables; it was ploughed every hour of the day and night by an infinite number of grey and black cats, which lent it the semblance of a workshop for witches.

The sense of an antiquated space, magically cluttered, obscurely complex, and irretrievably decadent, extends outward from the castle kitchen into the whole premodern feudal world of Fratta where the feckless count and his selfish wife reign supreme, supported by the count's brother, Monsignor Orlando, a cleric whose most urgent concern is his stomach and whose only heartfelt attachment to religion seems to be his determination to have his urchin nephew, Carlo, learn the *Confiteor*, the Latin penitential prayer that begins "I confess," by heart.

Among rigid but intricate hierarchies, revealed by different angles and frequencies of knee-bending, the count is supposed to be administering justice in the locality, a task he lazily assigns to his corrupt clerk and other variously clownish inferiors. In fact,

justice was the reign of the cunning and the sly, and it was only with cunning and trickery that the poor could find a way to compensate themselves for the bullying they endured.

But if the whole purpose of the opening two hundred pages of *Confessions* is to suggest that whatever nostalgia one might have for pre-Napoleonic Italy, its customs were already exhausted and even grotesque long before the modern era swept them away, still the worst manifestation of that decadence comes with the count and countess's utter failure to prepare their children for adulthood. The eldest daughter, Clara, is assigned to keeping her grandmother company in her bedridden decline; presumably at some point someone will want to marry her. Their son, Rinaldo, is allowed to lose himself in abstruse studies of no relevance to any future duty. Above all, the youngest daughter, Pisana, the liveliest, most talented, and most beautiful of the three, is left entirely to her own devices, without even the menial duties that give some structure to Carlo's life.

From earliest infancy Carlo is in love with Pisana, who is two years his junior. She is splendidly generous and capricious, but has no intention of limiting her favors to her cousin; instead she scandalizes the maids by gathering together a gang of boyfriends from the lowest classes:

As the band [of her friends] grew, so did her ambition to hold court, and as she was quite a precocious girl, as I've said, and liked to play the little lady, there were soon flirtations, jealousies, marriages, separations, reconciliations: all in childish fun, of course, but still, a fair indication of la Pisana's nature.

And may I suggest that there was not so much innocence in all of this as people would like to believe: it astonishes me to think how the Contessina used to roll around in the hay and ride piggyback on one boy or another, how she would pretend to marry and go off to sleep with her husband, driving away all unwelcome witness from that tender scene.

Carlo reflects on the link between infant license and later life. "Let us be frank," he says ominously, and indeed throughout *Confessions* Nievo's desire to break taboos that prevented candid discussion of sexuality is everywhere evident. "I sinned," we are told at one delicate moment. And again: "I believe that a Christian education does



Gerolamo Induno:  
Garibaldi at Capua, 1861

more to conceal than remove vice." It encourages deception, slyness. Reassured by the formalities of absolution, Italians indulge in "wild, lax and sensual habits." They have grown flighty and unreliable. "How can we expect millions of men," Carlo concludes, "to conduct a great national drive lasting one, two, ten or twenty years, when not one of them is capable of keeping up that drive for three straight months?"

This rapid swinging from the personal and intimate to the vast sweep of history is a constant in the book and keeps readers alert, if only to wonder if the connections are convincing. Separated by social status, hindered by the canon law that forbade union between cousins, Carlo and Pisana are constantly seeking to leave each other, and constantly brought back together by an attraction over which neither has any control. Doubtless Nievo's own fatal attraction to his cousin's wife was in his mind as he wrote, and some of the scenes achieve an intensity and psychological complexity that looks forward to D'Annunzio or Verga.

One evening when the ten-year-old Carlo is sent hungry to bed in a tiny cubbyhole, Pisana, "half-naked in her nightdress," comes to comfort him and "barefoot and trembling with cold, leapt into [his] bed." All is well until she complains that he is too nice to her when she is unkind to him. She wants him to punish her, she says. She wants him to pull out a lock of her hair. If not she will shriek so loud they will both be discovered and punished. "'I tell you I want to be punished!' she shrieked, beating her feet and knees against the rough floor."

The same conflicted behavior will see Pisana ruining the lives of various

suitors (one in particular falls into a long psychosomatic malaise), and eventually marrying a rich old man to save the family from bankruptcy caused by her mother's gambling debts. All this while never entirely abandoning Carlo. For forty years the two are forever losing and finding each other, in and out of depression and related illnesses. They will be together when Venice capitulates to Napoleon, the novel's most complex and dramatic moment. They meet again in the thick of a patriotic uprising in southern Italy. They betray each other, hate each other, love each other again. Losing Pisana, Carlo turns to revolutionary conspiracy: a new and modern nation, he believes, will be one where education is sound and there are no outdated conventions to thwart true love. At the same time he wonders if he is engaging in revolution only to escape an inappropriate obsession.

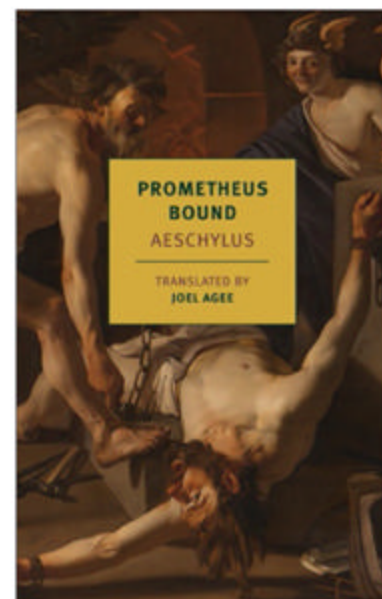
Each time the reader feels convinced that the relationship must be over it starts again in an unexpected way. When Carlo almost suspects Pisana of a lesbian relationship with a younger woman, she surprises him by demanding that he marry the girl to save himself from her, something that, after much agonizing, he does. But still their story isn't over. Pisana will save Carlo from execution when he is condemned to death in a Neapolitan prison, and when he goes temporarily blind with cataracts she will beg for him on the streets of London, a safe haven for many Italian patriots at the time. Finally, her "suicide of love" becomes a real suicide as, aware of having destroyed both their lives, Pisana simply wills herself into decline and death to save Carlo's marriage and leave him free to serve his country.

This tormented but always vivid relationship is paralleled by the sadder story of Pisana's much older sister Clara (Nievo's beloved Bice also had a sister eight years older than herself). As calm and pious as Pisana is wild and sensual, Clara is courted, for her wealth, by the vain Count Partistagno and for her beauty by the merely libertine Count Venchieredo. However, the local doctor's son, Signor Lucilio, himself training to be a doctor, woos the girl more surreptitiously while supposedly assisting her ailing grandmother. Eventually he wins her heart, but convention demands that the girl marry a noble, not a commoner. Nievo offers a powerful drama of a young woman fighting for her freedom as Clara turns down both titled men, but in order to do so she has to claim that she wishes to become a nun.

To keep her daughter away from Lucilio, Clara's mother takes her to Venice and eventually persuades her to move into a convent. Maturing from profligate youth to expert doctor and dedicated patriot, Lucilio follows his beloved to Venice and builds up such a fortune that when old Venice collapses and with it all the old restrictions of feudalism, he is well placed to go to the convent and invite Clara to become his wife. She refuses. Deprived of her vitality and brainwashed by her mother superior, she has dedicated her virginity to God.

This turnaround from positive modern heroine to frigid and idle nun, one of the many telling reversals in the book, expresses Nievo's growing frustration over the church's role in holding

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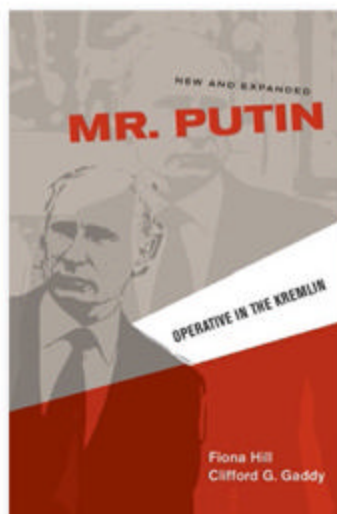
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Italians back. Again and again priests and nuns are shown as intimidating the ignorant and encouraging mindless obedience to obsolete, repressive authorities. During one depressive malaise brought on by Pisana's betrayals, Carlo consults the powerful Padre Pendola, who encourages him to shift his attention from private pleasure to some valuable public service. Ironically, one of the book's most eloquent and idealistic speeches is delivered by a man the reader has already understood is cynical and corrupt. The public service Carlo is pushed toward involves spying on fellow students in Padua to identify those sympathetic to revolution. It is this spying that introduces Carlo to the patriotic movement where authentic passion sweeps away ecclesiastical eloquence.

Meanwhile, Lucilio, deprived of an object of love, directs his bitterness toward the patriotic struggle, where he is joined by Giulio, Pisana's most unhappy and ailing suitor, and Leopardo, who has married happily only to be betrayed by a frivolous wife. This alignment of personal unhappiness and political commitment runs throughout Risorgimento literature, starting with Ugo Foscolo's masterpiece, *The Last Letters of Jacopo Ortis* (1802). Disappointment in love disposes a man to extremes. He is willing to fight. But if revolution fails, or the patriotic cause disappoints, the hero is exposed to even deeper depression. Leopardo takes poison and kills himself when his marital woes are compounded by Venice's capitulation to the French.

Much of *Confessions* is concerned with the question of how personal frustration and despair can be harnessed to serious and lasting public endeavor. Immediately upon finishing his novel, completed in just eight frenetic months, Nievo himself fell into a depression entirely similar to those he describes in his book. Two years later, when he set sail with Garibaldi for Sicily, the adventure is described in his correspondence as a cheerful and noble collective suicide.

The plot of *Confessions* is rich, picaresque, extravagant. Young Carlo draws benevolent attention to himself among the local people when he helps save the castle from the rival fiefdom of Venchieredo. The complex dispute behind the attack draws in the Venetian Republic and the count's extended family in farcical shenanigans that lead to one servant's promising the count that "I shall be the witness of anything you command."

Later Carlo gets an education in Padua, tells us about his atheism and idealism, falls in and out of depression, joins revolutionaries at the university, becomes administrator of his uncle's property, meets Napoleon, rediscovers his father, and eventually takes the man's place at the council of Venetian patricians. He witnesses the charade of supposed French freedoms being imposed on the Venetian people and escapes from the police by jumping from a window into the Grand Canal. He joins an uprising in the south and saves a woman from a burning house in the thick of the battle, only to discover that she is Pisana, who has become his commander's mistress.

And so on. This and a great deal more takes us to the book's halfway point. Carlo has still to marry, fall out

with his wife over the children's education, lose a son in a patriotic uprising, and follow a dozen different crafts and professions, none of which, he laments, he freely chose himself, as he didn't choose his lovers or his wife either. And all is delivered in a fresh, lively prose, simultaneously aware of the need to establish a standard Italian for a unified Italy, but equally eager not to lose all the vitality of the country's dialects in the process.

For those who read Italian, Nievo's writing is an exciting surprise, full of unexpected turns of expression, droll, rapturous, or argumentative. In this regard, while the English reader could never be given the same experience contemporary Italians enjoy on reading *Confessions*, the translator Frederika Randall has been remarkably successful in keeping the novel's flavor and sustaining Nievo's quirkiness and readability over so many pages. Here is his introduction of Carlo's uncle the count, one of scores of rapid and brilliant sketches:

The Count of Fratta was a man past sixty who always looked as if he had just stepped out of his armor, so stiffly and pompously did he sit in his chair. But his elaborate bagwig, his long cinder-colored, scarlet-trimmed *zimarra*, and the boxwood snuff container forever in his hands detracted somewhat from the warrior pose....

When the Count spoke the flies fell silent, and when he had finished, each man agreed in his own fashion, with his voice or with a nod of the head, and when the count laughed, all hastened to laugh, and when he sneezed, even when tobacco caused the sneeze, eight or nine voices shouted out: "Long live!" "His health!" "His happiness!" "God save the count!" When he got up, all got up, and when he left the kitchen, everyone, even the cats, breathed deeply, as if a millstone had been lifted from their breasts.

History has not been kind to Nievo's book. Death prevented him from revising it, or from building up an oeuvre that would very likely have put him among Italy's greats. And as the governments of the post-Risorgimento period set about imposing a cultural homogeneity on the country, Alessandro Manzoni's conservative and very Catholic masterpiece, *The Betrothed* (1827), safely set in the distant past, was always going to be preferred to Nievo's rich and wild account of love and politics, where so much was dangerously close to home. Manzoni is still a staple of the Italian school curriculum, while it is rare to meet anyone who has read Nievo. Yet there is no doubt in my mind which author English-speaking readers will prefer now that *Confessions of an Italian* is at last attractively translated in its entirety.

Nievo is so seductive and convincingly reminds us that political movements can never be separated from the private worlds of their leaders. Five years after his death, his beloved Bice died of tuberculosis. She asked to be buried in the red shirt Nievo had worn with Garibaldi. There was no separating thwarted passion and patriotism. □



# John & Harriet: Still Mysterious

Cass R. Sunstein

## Hayek on Mill: The Mill-Taylor Friendship and Other Writings

by Friedrich Hayek,  
edited by Sandra J. Peart.  
University of Chicago Press,  
373 pp., \$65.00

John Stuart Mill may well be the most important liberal thinker of the nineteenth century. In countless respects, his once-revolutionary arguments have become familiar, even part of the conventional wisdom. Certainly this is so for his great 1869 essay *The Subjection of Women*, which offered a systematic argument for sex equality at a time when the inferior status of women was widely taken for granted. It is also true for *On Liberty*, published in 1859, which famously argued that unless there is harm to others, people should have the freedom to do as they like. A strong advocate for freedom of speech, Mill offered enduring arguments against censorship. He also had a great deal to say about, and on behalf of, representative government.

Friedrich Hayek was the twentieth century's greatest critic of socialism, and he won the Nobel Prize in economics. A lifelong defender of individual liberty, he argued that central planning is bound to fail, even if the planners are well motivated, because they cannot possibly assemble the information that is ultimately incorporated in the price system. Hayek described that system as a "marvel," because it registers the knowledge, the preferences, and the values of countless people. Hayek used this insight as the foundation for a series of works on freedom and liberalism. Committed to free markets and deeply skeptical of the idea of "social justice," he is a far more polarizing figure than Mill, beloved on the political right but regarded with ambivalence by many others. Nonetheless, Hayek belongs on any list of the most important liberal thinkers of the twentieth century.

Mill and Hayek help to define the liberal tradition, but in both temperament and orientation, they could not be further apart. Mill was a progressive, a social reformer, an optimist about change, in some ways a radical. He believed that, properly understood, liberalism calls for significant revisions in the existing economic order, which he saw as palpably unjust: "The most powerful of all the determining circumstances is birth. The great majority are what they were born to be." Hayek was not exactly a conservative—in fact he was sharply critical of conservatism on the ground that it was largely oppositional and did not offer an affirmative position—but he generally venerated traditions and long-standing practices, seeing them as embodying the views and knowledge of countless people over long periods. Hayek admired Edmund Burke, who attacked the idea that self-styled reformers, equipped with an abstract theory, should feel free to override social practices that had stood the test of time. Mill had an abstract theory, one based on a conception of liberty from both government and oppressive social customs, and he thought that society could be evaluated by reference to it.

Against this background, there is every reason to be intrigued by a new

book with the title *Hayek on Mill*. Hayek died in 1992, but the University of Chicago Press is continuing with a multivolume edition of his collected works. Readers are discovering essays by Hayek that were never published, were not easily available, or were not widely known. What would Hayek have to say about a great champion of liberty, in some ways his intellectual ancestor, who ended up embracing socialism?

How stunning, then, to find that the volume has only a few snippets on that question. Instead it largely consists of a book, first published in 1951, that grew

norms, had a great deal to do with his relationship with Taylor. As we shall see, Hayek himself missed the connection entirely, because his own preoccupations lay elsewhere.

Hayek begins the book with one of his central puzzles, and it involves Taylor rather than Mill: "The literary portrait which in the *Autobiography* John Stuart Mill has drawn for us of the woman who ultimately became his wife creates a strong wish to know more about her." Mill's own account suggests that she must have been "one of the most remarkable women who ever

are buried in her grave, I should be the medium of a greater benefit to it, than is ever likely to arise from anything that I can write, unprompted and unassisted by her all but unrivalled wisdom.

One of Hayek's projects is to discover whether Mill's account was "sheer delusion."

Mill and Taylor met at a dinner in 1830, when she was just twenty-two, a mother of two boys, and married for four years to John Taylor, eleven years older than she and a junior partner in a family firm of wholesale druggists. Thomas Carlyle called him "an innocent dull good man." An acquaintance describes her, at the time, as "possessed of a beauty and grace quite unique of their kind," with "large dark eyes, not soft or sleepy, but with a look of quiet command in them." She wrote poetry and was soon to produce a number of essays on social usages and conventions, including one that prefigured Mill's attacks on conformity, decades later, in *On Liberty*.

For his part, Mill was nothing like the dry, somewhat desiccated old man depicted in photographs. Twenty-four at the time, he must have cut a dashing figure, having been described by Carlyle as "a slender, rather tall and elegant youth," who was "remarkably gifted with precision of utterance, enthusiastic, yet lucid, calm." At the same time, his emotional state was not good. In a forlorn letter to a friend, written a year before meeting Taylor, he referred to "the comparative loneliness of my probable future lot," and contended that there was "now no human being... who acknowledges a common object with me."

In his autobiography, Mill insisted that it was not until years after meeting Taylor that their relationship "became at all intimate or confidential." Hardly. Referring to an article published in mid-1831, Taylor's closest friend pointedly wrote her, "Did you or Mill do it?" In the same year, a letter from a mutual friend, written to John Taylor, spoke mysteriously of the need for a "reconciliation" between Mr. Taylor and Mill. In 1832, Mrs. Taylor wrote Mill that they must not meet again, to which Mill responded in French: "*Sa route et la mienne sont séparées, elle l'a dit: mais elles peuvent, elles doivent, se rencontrer. A quelqu' époque, dans quelqu' endroit, que ce puisse être, elle me trouvera toujours ce que j'ai été, ce que je suis encore.*" (Her path and mine are separate, she said so: but they can, they must, come together. At whatever time, in whatever place that might be, she will find me forever as I was, as I am still.) A few weeks later, their relationship resumed.

By 1832, the two had embarked on some kind of love affair. Taylor wrote Mill: "Far from being unhappy or even low this morning, I feel as tho' you had never loved me half so well as last night." And later, in response to an apparent confession from Mill:

I am glad that you have said it—I am happy that you have—no one



Friedrich Hayek with a class at the London School of Economics, 1948

out of an enormous, uncharacteristic, and somewhat obsessive undertaking by Hayek, which was to assemble what remains of the correspondence between Mill and his eventual wife, Harriet Taylor (one or the other destroyed numerous letters, probably including the most interesting), and to use it as the basis for a narrative account of their mysterious love affair.

The book raises mysteries of its own. For all his greatness, Hayek was a cold, abstract, and distant writer, celebrating the operations of free markets but without a lot of interest in the full range of human emotions. Some liberals (including Mill) have a romantic streak; Hayek is not among them. How was it, exactly, that Hayek, of all people, became captivated by the story of John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor? A possible answer is that he had to explain to himself and others why Mill—one of the few thinkers he had to regard as an intellectual equal or superior—moved away from what Hayek celebrated as classical liberalism, which for Hayek was focused on limited government and protection of free markets. But Hayek's interest in the romance itself outpaced his interest in the evolution of Mill's thinking (perhaps because of the beauty and great delicacy of the correspondence).

Does that romance have anything to do with liberalism and liberty? I think so. One of the lessons we can draw from Hayek's work of excavation is that Mill's distinctive form of liberalism, with its emphasis on individual freedom from the confining effect of social

lived." Hayek quotes a very long passage from Mill himself:

In general spiritual characteristics, as well as in temperament and organization, I have often compared her, as she was at this time, to Shelley: but in thought and intellect, Shelley, so far as his powers were developed in his short life, was but a child compared with what she ultimately became. Alike in the highest regions of speculation and in the smaller practical concerns of daily life, her mind was the same perfect instrument, piercing to the very heart and marrow of the matter; always seizing the essential idea or principle.

The same exactness and rapidity of operation, pervading as it did her sensitive as [well as] her mental faculties, would with her gifts of feeling and imagination have fitted her to be a consummate artist, as her fiery and tender soul and her vigorous eloquence would certainly have made her a great orator, and her profound knowledge of human nature and discernment and sagacity in practical life, would in [the] times when such a *carrière* was open to women, have made her eminent among the rulers of mankind.

Mill had a lot more to say about Harriet Taylor:

Were I [but] capable of interpreting to the world one half the great thoughts and noble feelings which

Paul Popper/Popperfoto/Getty Images



with any fineness & beauty of character but must feel compelled to say *all*, to the being they really *love*, or rather with any *permanent* reservation it is *not* love—while there is reservation, however little of it, the love is just *so much* imperfect.... Yes—these circumstances *do* require greater strength than any other—the greatest—that which you have, & which if you had not I should never have loved you, I should not love you now.

The Taylors agreed to a separation, and Mill and Harriet were able to spend time together. To a close friend, Mill wrote a rapturous letter:

I am astonished when I think how much has been restrained, how much untold, unshewn and uncommunicated till now.... Not a day has passed without removing some real & serious obstacle to happiness.... There will never again I believe be any obstacle to our being together entirely.

Taylor wrote in a similar spirit, stating that “there has been so much more pain than I thought I was capable of, but also O how much more happiness.”

Hayek writes that in the middle of the 1830s, Mill and Taylor did not try to conceal their intimacy but, confronted with a great deal of malicious gossip, they withdrew almost entirely from social life. In 1834, Carlyle wrote of the rumor that Mill had “fallen *desperately in love* with some young philosophic beauty” and been “lost to all his friends and to himself.” Enraged by the gossip, Mill cut off a number of his friendships. He wrote to a friend: “What ought to be so much easier to me than to her, is in reality more difficult—costs harder struggle—to part company with the opinion of the world, and with my former mode of doing good in it.”

It is not entirely clear what happened between Mill and Taylor from the middle 1830s to the late 1840s. What little that remains of their correspondence shows a degree of agitation within and between them. Taylor to Mill: “I don’t know why I was so low when you went this morning. I was *so low*—I could not bear your going my darling one; yet I should be well enough accustomed to it by now.” The two were alert to the reactions of others; Mill seemed especially sensitive on that count. Taylor to Mill, perhaps teasingly: “I was not *quite* wrong in thinking you feared opinions.—I never supposed you dreaded the opinions of fools but only of those who are otherwise wise & good but have not your opinions about Moralities.” But there can be little doubt about the intensity of their relationship. Taylor to Mill: “When I think that I shall not hold your hand until Tuesday the time is so long & my hand so useless. Adieu my delight.”

In 1848, Taylor returned to London after traveling with Mill, only to discover that her husband had fallen gravely ill with cancer. For a period of two months, she dedicated herself entirely to caring for him and saw Mill not at all, restricting herself to correspondence, some of it angry, even bitter:

You talk of my writing to you ‘at some odd time when a change of

subject of thought may be rather a relief than otherwise!’ *odd time!* Indeed you must be ignorant profoundly of all that *friendship* or *anxiety* means when you can use such pitiful narrow hearted expressions.

And as her husband neared the end: “The sadness & horror of Nature’s daily doings exceed a million fold all the attempts of Poets! There is nothing on earth I would not do for him & there is nothing on earth which *can* be done. Do not write.”

In 1851, two years after her husband’s death, she and Mill were married. The event must have been joyful, a kind of completion, but as Hayek reports, “the marriage led to the most painful episode in Mill’s life, his complete break with his mother and her other



John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor; paintings by George Frederic Watts, 1873, and an unknown artist, circa 1834

children.” The occasion for the break is yet another mystery. It must have had something to do with their disapproval or sense of scandal, but Hayek describes it as “almost as unintelligible to his relations as to us.” Twenty years after the break, his sister Harriet expressed genuine bafflement, reporting that “up to the time of his marriage he had been everything to us,” and “it was a frightful blow to lose him at once and for ever, without [one] word of explanation,—only in evident anger.”

The marriage was quiet, productive, and supremely happy, but both husband and wife suffered from a series of illnesses. In 1854, Mill believed himself to be gravely sick. He wrote:

The only change I find in myself from a near view of probable death is that it makes me instinctively conservative. It makes me feel, not as I am accustomed—oh, for something better!—but oh, that we could be going on as we were before. Oh, that those I love could be spared the shock of a great change!

But he recovered well, and it was Taylor who became desperately ill four years later. Mill wrote an appeal to a doctor: “I implore to you come immediately. I need hardly say that any expense whatever will not count for a feather in the balance.” He never came (perhaps because the letter arrived too late).

Shortly after her death, Mill wrote: “It is doubtful if I shall ever be fit for anything public or private, again. The spring of my life is broken. But I shall best fulfil her wishes by not giving up the attempt to do something useful.” *On Liberty* was published in 1859 and

dedicated “to the beloved and deplored memory of her who was the inspirer, and in part the author, of all that is best in my writings.” Mill lived to 1873, and many of his greatest works appeared after Taylor’s death.

Remarkably, Hayek ends his book with very little about Taylor’s influence on Mill’s thought. But in fragments of the book, and in other essays in this volume, we can uncover Hayek’s views on the mysteries with which he began. Hayek agrees that Taylor’s “influence on his thought and outlook, whatever her capacities may have been, were quite as great as Mill asserts.” At the same time, Hayek concludes, “they acted in a way somewhat different from what is commonly believed. Far from it having

account comes from Hayek’s own story of their relationship. Mill cared deeply about social justice, and he came to embrace what he described as a form of socialism, above all because of the unfairness of “the present economic order of society.” But his complex writing on that topic should hardly be seen as an endorsement of centralized government planning. Mill was never a rationalist in Hayek’s pejorative sense.

Where Taylor most influenced Mill was on topics that were not the subject of Hayek’s main focus. Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* (largely ignored during his lifetime) was clearly influenced by Taylor’s views as expressed in her 1851 essay *The Enfranchisement of Women*.<sup>2</sup> Taylor sketched many of Mill’s central arguments, and others that were more radical still, including an explanation of why married women should work outside the home:

A woman who contributes materially to the support of the family, cannot be treated in the same contemptuously tyrannical manner as one who, however she may toil as a domestic drudge, is a dependent on the man for subsistence.

*On Liberty* is widely taken to be an argument for limited government, and so it is. But it is crucial to see that in contending that people may be restrained only to prevent “harm to others,” Mill was speaking of the effects of social norms and conventions, not merely of government. Much of his attack was on the oppressive quality of public opinion. Taylor herself had made similar arguments more than two decades earlier, and it is hard to mistake the connections among her youthful views, his own painful experiences in the 1840s, and his passionate arguments against the tyranny of custom. His particular case for liberty emphasized the immense importance of allowing “experiments of living.” In his view, “the worth of different modes of life should be proved practically, when any one thinks fit to try them. It is desirable, in short, that in things which do not primarily concern others, individuality should assert itself.”

Here we can find the sharpest of the divergences between two of the great figures in the liberal tradition. Enthusiastic about individualism, Hayek generally prized traditions and customs. Mill did not:

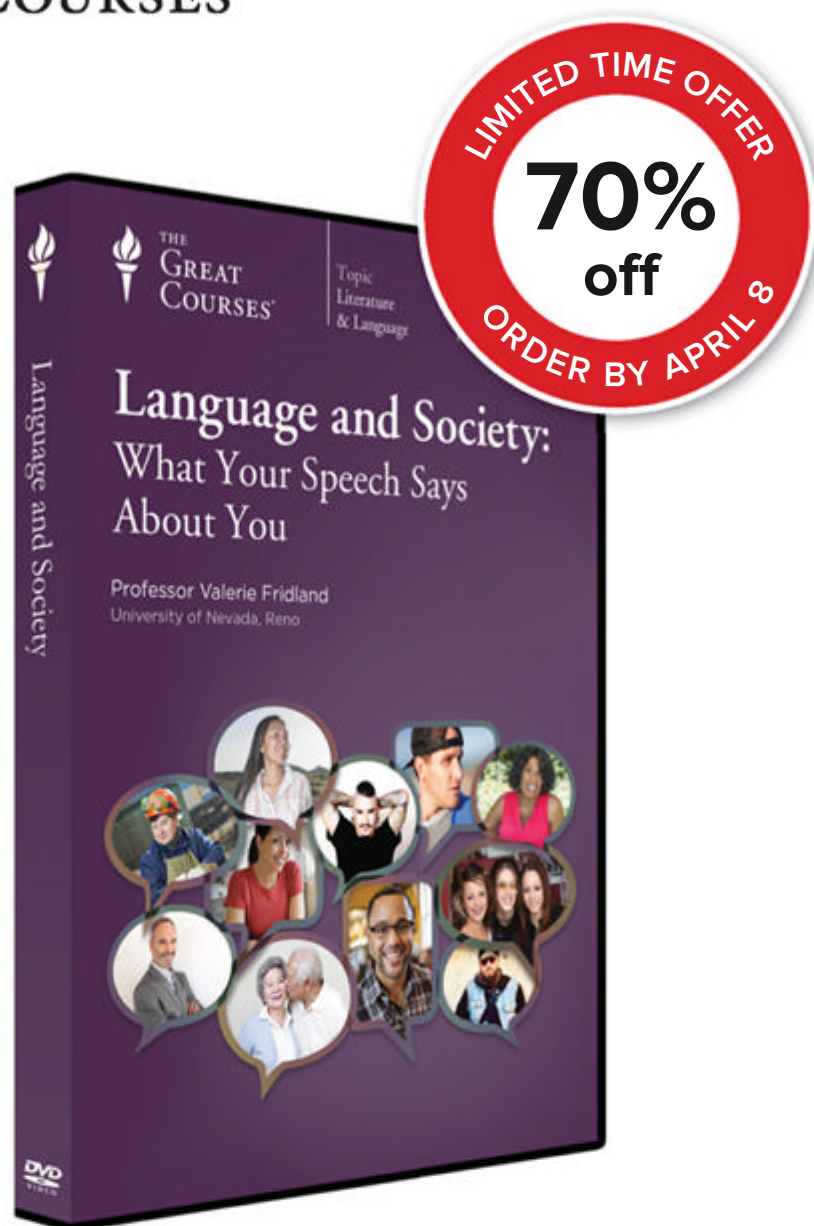
Where, not the person’s own character, but the traditions or customs of other people are the rule of conduct, there is wanting one of the principal ingredients of human happiness, and quite the chief ingredient of individual and social progress.

This is a timeless claim, to be sure. But as Hayek’s book demonstrates, it is also intensely autobiographical. Mill and Taylor embarked for many years on a kind of “experiment of living” that was designed to promote their own happiness despite being roundly condemned

<sup>2</sup>There continues to be some dispute about whether Mill or Taylor was the true author of *The Enfranchisement of Women*, but the general consensus is in favor of Taylor, and hence that Mill rightly reported that it was “hers in a peculiar sense, my share in it being little more than that of an editor and amanuensis.”

<sup>1</sup>The best discussion of this subject remains Edna Ullmann-Margalit, “Invisible-Hand Explanations,” *Synthese*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (1978).





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by “the traditions or customs of other people.” But their individuality asserted itself. The worth of their different mode of life was proved practically.

All this leaves the mystery with which Hayek started: Who was Harriet Taylor? Hayek’s own verdict was clear. She “was an unusual person. But the picture

Mill has given us of her is throughout determined by his own character and tells us probably more of him than of her.” To Hayek, Mill was in the grip of a delusion. Thus Hayek’s conclusion:

Behind the hard shell of complete self-control and strictly rational

behavior there was [in Mill] a core of a very soft and almost feminine sensitivity, a craving for a strong person on which he could lean, and on whom he could concentrate all his affection and admiration.

Though fascinated by the scandal and

the romance, Hayek rendered a cold verdict on Taylor herself. Perhaps he was right. But I prefer Mill’s own: “She was the sole earthly delight of those who had the happiness to belong to her. . . . Were there but a few hearts and intellects like hers this earth would already become the hoped-for heaven.” □

# A Wonderful Novel and an Impossible Challenge

Deborah Eisenberg

## The End of Days

by Jenny Erpenbeck, translated from the German by Susan Bernofsky. New Directions, 239 pp., \$22.95

Jenny Erpenbeck’s wonderful *The End of Days* opens with the death of an infant in 1902 near the eastern border of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and ends with the death, nine decades later, of a woman in an old people’s home in Berlin, but the book, bracketed as it is by death, is so alive that one closes it gently.

The eschatological title’s overtones of cataclysm and cultural degradation set us off at a run through twentieth-century Europe, and Erpenbeck employs its further suggestion of resurrection as well: the child who dies at the beginning of the book and the old woman who dies at its end are one and the same person, whom the author leads to one mortal impasse and then another. Each time she dies, the author brings her back, to be harried along again between the high walls of her historical circumstances until her final incarnation is allowed to die of old age.

By current reckoning, at under 250 pages *The End of Days* is a fairly short novel, especially considering that its scope is a century and a continent, but Erpenbeck dispenses with the heaps of clutter with which many fiction writers simulate weight and distills the horrors of the times into an intoxicating, bitter essence. The book’s formal ingenuity is elegant and exhilarating, ferocious as well as virtuosic. One experiences the author’s urgent drive to pin down and scrutinize, using any means possible, the elusive, shape-shifting enigmas of human experience, including the appetite that members of our species have for destroying one another.

Although the four volumes of Erpenbeck’s fiction available to us—all rendered from the original German into supple and gorgeous English by Susan Bernofsky—are very different from one another, they share an inventiveness that is purposeful rather than decorative, an astringent grace, potent atmospheres and imagery, a seething compound of violence, loveliness, absurdity, grief, cold outrage, and compassion, as well as that very welcome economy.

Erpenbeck was born in East Berlin in 1967—a circumstance that would likely permit no escape from a confrontation with recent and extreme deformations of humanity. The GDR didn’t quite dare make Austria’s preposterous claim to victimhood, but it did disavow the stain of German fascism by ascribing to itself, courtesy of its Soviet affiliation,

an antifascist past. So much the worse for everyone; while the East Germans suffered under Soviet domination and its particular debasements, much Nazi memorabilia was stowed carefully away in attics, to be cherished nostalgically in secret. And as the world now knows very well, residents of the GDR—unlike contemporary Americans, who, thanks to Google and our iPhones, spy on ourselves efficiently and cheerfully for the NSA while shopping, working, and flirting—had to drudge away for the Stasi, spying on one another.

A child born in 1967 in the GDR will have been surrounded by specters from both the Third Reich and the Soviet empire disguised as the baker, the postman, the doctor, adoring grandparents. Such a child might develop the power to see through smiles and the walls of houses and the thick mists of time. Of Erpenbeck’s work available in English, *The End of Days* is her most direct address to history, and to my mind, it has the greatest drive and tensile strength. Menace seems to reside in the very substance of the pages.

As its premise keeps changing, the elaborate plot is difficult to summarize, even crudely—but let us say that, as Erpenbeck writes, toward the end of the nineteenth century, near the eastern border of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a Jewish woman, a shopkeeper, has a daughter. Where is her father, the child wonders as she grows up. The mother gives an unconvincingly vague account—he left, she says; he’s in France, or America.

When the daughter is sixteen, a young

gentile civil servant, made helpless by the girl’s beauty, asks the shopkeeper’s permission to marry her despite the fact that her Jewish parentage is bound to have serious consequences for him, and the shopkeeper agrees to the marriage. The girl’s grandfather sits shiva rather than come to the wedding, and the young man’s father will have nothing more to do with him.

Life is difficult in this little town at the edge of the known world, but the couple is very much in love until, in 1902, their first child, a daughter, dies suddenly in infancy, after which the civil servant, in despair, finds his way onto a ship headed for Ellis Island.

Stripping her dead granddaughter’s cradle, the shopkeeper reflects on how her husband was killed at the hands of an angry mob when their own daughter was still an infant:

She and her husband hadn’t managed to get the downstairs shutters closed before the first stones struck the house. Her husband had tried to see who was throwing the stones and had recognized Andrei. Andrei, he’d shouted out the window, Andrei! But Andrei didn’t hear him—or pretended not to, which was more likely, since he knew perfectly well who lived in the house he was throwing stones at. Then one of Andrei’s stones came hurtling through a window pane, passing just a hair’s breadth from her head, and crashed into the glass-fronted bookcase behind her, striking Volume 9 of the leather-bound edition of Goethe’s *Collected Works* that her hus-

band’s parents had given him as a gift when he finished school. *No breath of air disturbs the place,/ Deathly silence far and wide./O’er the ghastly deeps no single/Wavelet ripples on the tide.*

Hereupon her husband, filled with rage, flung open the front door, apparently intending to seize Andrei by the collar and bring him to his senses, but when he saw Andrei running toward the house with three or four other young men, one of them brandishing an axe, he slammed it shut again at once. Quickly, he turned the key in the lock, and together with his wife tried to take up the boards that always stood ready beside the door, waiting for just such an emergency, taking them and trying to nail them over the door. But it was already too late for this—where were the nails, where the hammer?—for the door was already beginning to splinter beneath the blows of the axe. Andrei, Andrei.

Then she and her husband ran up the stairs, banging on the door behind which the wet nurse sat with the baby, but she didn’t open the door: either because she didn’t understand who was asking to be let in, or because she was so frightened she was unwilling to open it. The woman and her husband then fled to the attic, up one last steep flight of stairs, while down below Andrei and his men were already bursting into the house.

All for the purpose of protecting her daughter, the shopkeeper had moved out of the ghetto; she never disclosed to her daughter the fact of her father’s grisly murder in a pogrom, and then one morning she pledged the girl to a gentile. But like so many efforts made with the intention of protecting someone or something or some national entity against the assaults of the future, the consequences of her decisions turn out to be disastrous:

That morning, for the sake of her daughter’s happiness, she had sold her daughter’s happiness. Sometimes the price one pays for something continues to grow after the fact, becoming too expensive only long after it has been paid.

So, many years after the murder of her father, the young woman’s baby and husband are torn from her in one stroke.



Jenny Erpenbeck, Berlin, 2014; photograph by Dominique Nabokov

Dominique Nabokov



In the following section of the book we are asked to consider what might have happened if either the young woman or her husband had realized in time that the baby was dying. What might have happened if this half-Jewish baby had lived instead of dying in 1902 and her father had stayed with the family rather than fleeing to America? Then how might the lives of these people have proceeded?

Let us say that the family has a second daughter and moves to Vienna in order to improve their prospects. But it seems that wherever they are in the Habsburg Empire, the fact of having a Jewish wife will prevent the civil servant from receiving the promotions due him, and now the Great War is roaring in, devouring food and fuel and every form of comfort.

The older daughter—the child who was born in 1902—has, in this new imagining of the possibilities, lived to become a passionate, eloquent, and courageous teenager with flaming red hair and shining ideals. She and her friends are revolutionaries, and she keeps a diary, where she records her private thoughts. She hides her diary in a wardrobe and enjoins her little sister from reading it. But her fiery nature propels her into unrequited love for one of her friends, and in her anguish and humiliation she contrives her own death by persuading a man she hardly knows to shoot her.

With great delicacy and in a couple of brief, contiguous paragraphs, Erpenbeck presents first a memorial to the ruin of Europe at the close of World War I and then—with the implied murder of the redheaded daughter's younger sister twenty-four years later—to the annihilation of six million and more individual universes:

The father doesn't die until just over a year later, on December 2, 1920. His wife sells his clothes on the black market, but first she cuts off the gold-colored buttons with the eagle of the monarchy and puts them in a box. The father's December salary, paid out to the widow as a final installment, is just enough for one midday meal. At least the daughter gets an extra portion of milk with cocoa each day at school, thanks to the Americans.

In 1944 in a small forest of birch trees, a notebook filled with handwritten diary entries will fall to the ground when a sentry uses the butt of his rifle to push a young woman forward, and she tries to protect herself with arms she had previously been using to clutch the notebook to her chest. The book will fall in the mud, and the woman will not be able to return to pick it up again. For a while the book will remain lying there, wind and rain will turn its pages, footsteps will pass over it, until all the secrets written there are the same color as the mud.

But suppose the omnipotent author makes, as she does, some tiny—seemingly trivial—adjustments in her account of the redhead's fatal afternoon; what if, for instance, the author simply does not have the young woman turn onto the street where she will encounter her killer? In this way Erpenbeck

once again retrieves her character from death and sends her back into the boiling cauldron of Europe.

So let us now say the entrancing promise of justice and equality then beguiles the young woman to Russia as, at that time, it did so many intellectually inclined Jews from her region of the world. What might become of her then?

In Russia the young woman establishes herself as a writer, and Erpenbeck posits two extremes of experience for her to inhabit and live out to their fated conclusions. One of the most dazzling sections of the book takes place during 1937–1938, in which Erpenbeck portrays with explosive compression



Egon Schiele: Autumn Sun, 1912. For more on Schiele, see pages 20–22 of this issue.

the self-delusion, treachery, fragmented consciousness, and debasement that ensue when the vision of a stainless new order of justice slams into Stalin's Terror. Here—suggesting a session of defensive self-criticism, or a memory from prison, or testimony at an interrogation, or the phantom of a trial called up by fear—is a chorus of voices raised, apparently, in self-exculpation:

*They were all in a good mood, they were singing and drinking coffee.*

*When I was there, all they were doing was dancing. I can't dance, it was a dull two hours for me.*

*We showed up and played cards. We didn't have any particular conversations.*

*They were already having coffee. There was no discussion of politics at all.*

*V. sometimes turned up at my apartment, which I took to mean that he liked to smoke and drink for free. I saw no political motivation for his behavior.*

*And so V. was in my room on several occasions, mainly we talked about bygone days. In early November 1935 I had one last brief encounter with him on the street.*

*After the fall of 1931 I never saw him again. We weren't at all close, neither personally nor politically.*

*Once he came and sat with me as I was drinking a glass of beer. He*

*made a very bad impression on me, and I never saw him again.*

*He can't hold his drink at all. Usually the first glass is already enough for him.*

*Sometimes he's just pretending! That's right. I've seen that.*

*Did Comrade Br. ever run into Comrade T. at V.'s flat?*

*Not that I recall, but it's always possible. I'd rather err on the side of assuming he did.*

*Why do you consider this a possibility?*

*According to what I've heard, the two of them knew each other.*

*S., L., M., and O. were once*

*there, too. A female journalist from Sweden, then K., Sch. Once H. with his wife, and besides them, Comrade R., and Ö with his wife—I think that's all of them.*

*I was there once, too.*

*Oh, right, Fr. and also C.*

*Pretty much everyone was tipsy.*

*I consider it my duty to emphatically put a stop to these evenings, no matter how festive. When alcohol is being consumed, it is impossible to monitor whether a political remark is being made that can no longer be monitored.*

*I was at his apartment once on New Year's Eve when the entire house was full and there were also a large number of comrades in attendance.*

*Was I there?*

*No.*

*Was I there?*

*No.*

*Me?*

*No.*

*Once I went to his apartment because he had invited me ten times.*

*I was off traveling all the time, so I didn't have any sort of relationship with V. at all.*

*That V. managed to escape being unmasked by us as two-faced until the very end is of course quite disconcerting. The moral I draw from this is that his behavior was not entirely correct.*

The book's epigraph is a quotation from W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*—a moment when a Viennese Jew realizes that she and her family have delayed fleeing Austria for too long and are now caught up in the Gestapo's net: "We left from here for Marienbad only last summer. And now—where will we be going now?" The terrible question, whose answer is inarticulable and unthinkable—terminal—hangs over *The End of Days*, and throughout the book Erpenbeck mulls over matters of border: geographical, personal, political, and mortal.

As the border between East and West dissolves, we see the passionate, redheaded, radical woman, whom the author has brought repeatedly back over the one-way crossing between life and death, suffering from dementia in her Berlin nursing home, and we meet her son. He has spent his life in the Eastern Bloc, but he's now visiting Vienna, where his mother came from:

Like it or not, when he looks at the people here, he sees they are used to driving fast cars, that they know what a tax return is, and have no cause to hesitate before ordering a glass of prosecco with their breakfast. Just the way they let the door slam behind them when they walk in shows him how sure they are of being in the right world everywhere in the world. Now he too is sitting in this right world, he even has the right money in his wallet, although he's drinking water to conserve his "West money." *No dogs allowed.* The signs with the images of the dogs prohibited from entering butcher shops, restaurants and swimming pools existed in East Germany as well, and probably they existed everywhere in the world.

The border that used to separate him from the West has long since fallen—but now it seems to have slipped inside him, separating the person he used to be from the one he's supposed to be now, or allowed to be. I don't know how you recognize a human being, his mother said to him last time he visited. He doesn't want prosecco with his breakfast, like it or not. And he couldn't care less if the others can tell by his way of looking around, by his hair and cheeks, that he comes from the land that has finally, rightly so, thank God, high time now, been wiped off the face of the earth, the land of—what madness—publicly owned enterprises, red carnations for your lapel on May 1, rigged elections, old men wearing berets left over from the Spanish Civil War, and dialectics taught at school.

*A Man—how proud that sounds.* Getting off the night train at six in the morning, he saw people sleeping on pieces of cardboard in the station. In what world had he spent the last forty years? What happened to that world? Will he have the heart of a dog now for the rest of his life?

Although geographical and historical designations are specific and detailed in the book, the author generally dispenses with the expedients not only of quotation marks but of personal names as well. It's not until history loosens its grip on the protagonist and the Soviet





## THE COLLECTED NONFICTION OF RENATA ADLER

As a staff writer at *The New Yorker* from 1963 to 2001, Adler reported on civil rights from Selma, Alabama; on the war in Biafra, the Six-Day War, and the Vietnam War; on the Nixon impeachment inquiry and Congress; and on cultural life in Cuba. She has also written about cultural matters in the United States, films (as chief film critic for *The New York Times*), books, politics, television, and pop music.

This collection draws on *Toward a Radical Middle* (a selection of her earliest *New Yorker* pieces), *A Year in the Dark* (her film reviews), and *Canaries in the Mineshaft* (a selection of essays on politics and media), and also includes uncollected work from the past two decades.

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Union dissolves just as her sense of her own identity does that the author grants her a name.

Voices and thoughts, motifs, snatches of song, the occasional shock of a Yiddish phrase, and so on float through the stream of cool narration, settling into intricate patterns. But owing to the skill of both author and translator we always know where we are, who's thinking or speaking, what path a diary or a set of volumes of Goethe or the buttons of a civil servant's uniform have followed to end up where we find them. Still, you have to be awake when you read this book.

But you wouldn't want to read it as you're falling asleep anyhow. In fact you might want to read it when you're fully dressed, with a small bag at your side—of the sort that we New Yorkers are now instructed to keep at the ready in the event of a hurricane, a terrorist attack, a nuclear power plant malfunction, whatever—that includes a few energy bars, a liter of potable water, a flashlight, a passport, and, who knows, a big bottle of sedatives.

Twentieth-century Europe provided us with the illustrative range of brutality that is reenacted here: the intimate savagery of the pogroms, the wholesale destruction of world war, the Third Reich's systematic and disciplined genocide, and Stalin's implacable murders of a still-disputed number generally estimated at 20 or 30 million. But "history" isn't relegated by Erpenbeck to a setting for a story, nor is a story affixed, artificially, to a historical setting. The characters and background, fused, convey a continuing ferment of human irrationality.

Humans are easily persuaded that it's necessary to kill, and they rush to the job with alacrity. Since the moment we were thrown out of that garden we've been killing one another out of sheer greed and covetousness. And it's mortifying to think of ourselves as a particularly unpleasant animal whose nature causes it to seize from others what it can.

But many murderous convulsions all over the world are directed at populations that—as the Jews were in Europe—are cast in the public mind as enemies, and they are justified on that basis. One of the aspects of the Nazi Holocaust that makes it particularly horrifying to us is the grotesque clarity of its inversion of rationality and irrationality—the thin, decorous veneer of punctilious procedure and timetables and excellent records and smart uniforms, and so on, laid over a continent that had turned into an abattoir.

If we are not the rational beings we'd been telling ourselves we are, then what in the world are we? Sure, it's mortifying to confront humanity's rapacity, but maybe it's even more shaming and terrifying to contemplate the ease with which so many of us can persuade ourselves that it's rational to expunge some part of the population, the part considered "the others" or "the enemies." In other words, to contemplate the possibility that our species is fundamentally insane.

But ask the victim of any murder what motive she would prefer her murderer to have, or to be credited with. Here Erpenbeck offers an array for us to mourn equally.

1949 sentence—"To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric"—which is so frequently torn from its recondite context and twisted up into a cudgel with which to intimidate us. Never mind that the work from which it comes is a sustained and complex discourse concerning the commodification of culture; it sounds like something God might have said, and although many have decried or dismissed it, we can't seem to drop it—probably because it seems to express in a highly compressed way things that we ourselves are bound to feel—for example, that reality is in some way holy and that an attempt to reproduce or represent a great crime against humanity is a trespass; that no human has empathy sufficient to comprehend or humility sufficient to honor the suffering of another, let alone to try to reproduce it on a plain old piece of paper.

Who, if anyone, gets to do that? Anyone who owns a pencil can write about anything, and the more lurid the subject matter and the more inflated the treatment, the wider the readership is likely to be and the cheaper, more self-serving, and more meaningless the reader's response. Obviously the difficulties fade away, or seem to, the longer ago the horrors took place; a facile or trivial novel about the Punic Wars would probably seem less repellent than a facile or trivial novel about the Holocaust, although in a way that's our problem in a nutshell.

If fiction and poetry are too small a means to examine or mourn the enormities of human history, what is not? How are we to remember, let alone comprehend, our behavior? Although they are composed of the same abstract elements—words—we tend not to be uneasy about nonfiction the way we are about fiction; we *know* we need information, and facts (what we loosely mean by "facts") are considered to have an inviolate purity, whereas fiction by its nature is slippery and equivocal. But bookshelves abound with false, vapid, windy, meretricious, boastful, and clichéd works of nonfiction as well as of fiction, and one so frequently encounters histories or factual accounts or biographies that convey almost nothing that corresponds to actual experience.

And it is experience that fiction, for the most part, aims to convey. The very slipperiness of fiction, its equivocal nature, is what it has to offer. It is designed to weasel into tight corners, to take an imprint of the strange and subtle mental acts that are so difficult to record. Even in broad daylight when we can see clearly, we take in consciously only a fragment of what is in front of us. Our minds cast a soft veil over reality to disperse its glare, and it's only when sleep tears the veil away that we plunge into the depths of our terror and grief and love and desires.

It's the job of fiction writers, in my opinion, to swim around in dreams and nightmares and fish up what they find. Literature might be a dubious medium and not fully adequate to the immeasurable job of letting us know what's out in the world and what's deep in our psyches—letting us know how to "recognize a human being"—but as yet we haven't come up with anything better, and I, personally, am very grateful to writers who, like Erpenbeck, are willing and equipped to take up the challenge. □

No matter how far we run, it's impossible to get away from Adorno's famous



# Adam Michnik: A Hero of Our Time

Paul Wilson

## An Uncanny Era:

### Conversations Between

#### Václav Havel and Adam Michnik

edited and translated from the Polish and with an introduction by Elzbieta Matynia.

Yale University Press, 252 pp., \$25.00

## The Trouble with History:

### Morality, Revolution, and

#### Counterrevolution

by Adam Michnik,

edited by Irena Grudzinska Gross,

and translated from the Polish

by Elzbieta Matynia, Agnieszka

Marczyk, and Roman Czarny.

Yale University Press,

194 pp., \$25.00; \$17.00 (paper)

When Adam Michnik was still a political prisoner following the crackdown on the Solidarity trade union in his native Poland in December 1981, Czesław Miłosz wrote a foreword to a volume of Michnik's eloquent essays and letters from prison.<sup>1</sup> In it, Miłosz invoked the example of Mahatma Gandhi and predicted that with his steadfast advocacy of nonviolent political change, Michnik might well "bring honor to the last two decades of the twentieth century, even though," he added, "a film on his life will not be produced soon."

Miłosz was referring obliquely to Richard Attenborough's 1982 bio-epic, *Gandhi*, yet as far as I know, no one has picked up on his gentle hint that Michnik's life might make a terrific movie, especially now that we know how accurate the rest of his prognostication turned out to be. The movie would tell the story of a bright Jewish boy from Warsaw with an idealistic belief in communism, a love of history and literature (two of his favorite books were *Lord Jim* and *The Plague*), a wicked (Groucho) Marxian sense of humor,<sup>2</sup> and, despite a pronounced stammer, a love of debate and controversy that, in the aftermath of student unrest in 1968, got him expelled from university and ultimately earned him his first of many jail sentences.

After his release in 1969, he took a job as a welder in the Rosa Luxemburg lightbulb factory, where some of "the most beautiful girls in Warsaw" would temporarily distract him, although he would later quip that he never lost his way "on the path leading from eroticism to politics." In the 1970s, having finally broken with communism, he went back to university to study history, and began working out a new, abiding vision of how his country might evolve toward democracy.

After years in and out of prison as a Solidarity activist, Michnik ended up a national hero of sorts, one of the main strategists in his country's anti-totalitarian opposition, and a principal participant in the first of the several roundtable negotiations that swept Soviet-style communism off the map of Europe. And then, when Poland was

on its way to becoming a parliamentary democracy, he left politics to become the editor in chief of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, a newspaper he had helped establish in 1989 and that is now the largest independently owned daily in the region. From this vantage point, he would continue to report on the bumpy evolution of democracy, both in his own country and across Central Europe.

The recent release of two collections of interviews, essays, and letters, most of them originally published in *Gazeta*

the late 1940s were, in effect, talked out of power by groups of dissidents and unofficial opposition leaders who, until that point, had been treated as outlaws.

These activists were, of course, emboldened by huge demonstrations in the streets and encouraged not only by the collapse of Soviet support for the regimes they were opposing, but also by the weakening of Party despotism made possible by Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of perestroika and glasnost in the Soviet Union. The process was often messy and chaotic and the outcomes were sometimes maddeningly incon-



Adam Michnik receiving the 2010 Hanno R. Ellenbogen Citizenship Award for public service from Václav Havel, Prague, Czech Republic, January 2011

*Wyborcza*, will give English-speaking readers a taste of this most recent phase of Adam Michnik's colorful life. In her introduction to *An Uncanny Era*, Elzbieta Matynia calls Michnik "a curator of Poland's young democracy," though given his sharply critical and often controversial views on many of the trends in Central Europe since 1989, "caretaker" or "watchdog," or even "gadfly" might have been more appropriate metaphors. A deep sense of unease radiates from both of these books, as though hopes for a great "moral rebirth" after the defeat of communism had been dashed by the arrival instead of greed, materialism, and a spirit of vengeance. "We do not like this world of ours today," he writes in *The Trouble with History*. "We feel bad in this world of ours. Why is that?"

Why indeed? Why is Michnik's tone so skeptical, so much more in tune with our own anxieties about the state of the world than with the glowing nostalgia of the recent celebrations to mark the implosion of Soviet-style communism a quarter of a century ago?

It's worth remembering that the opening of the Berlin Wall was not the most extraordinary event in Europe in 1989, it was merely the most spectacular and the most symbolic. The real breakthrough happened in smoke-filled rooms around conference tables—first in Poland, then in Hungary, and finally in Czechoslovakia. The Communist parties that had wielded unchallenged authority since

clusive. But whatever success the dissidents had in engineering those peaceful transitions was due, in large measure, to strategies they had evolved over long, hard decades of trial and error.

Of all the dissident movements in Central Europe, the Polish democratic opposition was by far the largest, the most sophisticated, the most inventive, the most overtly political, and the most daring. It developed slowly, starting at least as far back as 1956, and with each expression of popular unrest, with each failed attempt at reform, with each violent response by the system, with each prison term served, opposition intellectuals like Michnik and Jacek Kuroń and Jan Józef Lipski and others sharpened and refined their understanding of how Communist totalitarianism worked and how best to oppose it.

By 1976, following large strikes in Ursus and Radom, Kuroń and others founded the Workers' Defense Committee (KOR) which became the political heart of the movement. They forged alliances with workers (through underground magazines like *Robotnik*, aimed at men and women on the factory floor) and with the church (Michnik's first book, *The Church and the Left*, from 1976, was a factor in making a rapprochement possible<sup>3</sup>). They

started educational initiatives like the Flying University and created an extensive network of underground publishing ventures. This opposition came to define itself as democratic, anti-totalitarian, nonviolent, and nonconspiratorial; its ultimate aim was to bring about a "self-limiting revolution," one that would not aim to replace the existing regime, but pressure it into making substantial concessions.

This approach ultimately led, in August 1980, to the emergence of the independent trade union Solidarity, which at its peak in 1981 had about ten million members and was the first of its kind in a Communist country not controlled by the Party. It lasted sixteen months before the regime, perhaps to forestall a Soviet military intervention, declared martial law in December 1981 and jailed Solidarity's chief instigators, Michnik included.

Solidarity activists went underground and for the next seven years, thanks in part to letters and essays by Michnik, many written from a prison cell, Solidarity remained organizationally strong and never lost sight, nor did it let the regime lose sight, of its willingness to talk. In early 1988, faced with 80 percent inflation rates and yet another huge wave of worker unrest, the Communist leaders, or rather the moderates among them, realized that they could not restore order without enormous bloodshed, and chose instead to meet with the leaders of Solidarity. After several months of wary maneuvering the two sides sat down in Warsaw in February 1989.

The Polish journalist and former Solidarity activist Konstanty Gebert, who was present at the talks as a reporter, said that Michnik was crucial to their outcome. His bargaining skills—his determination to reach a deal without giving an inch on principles—were formidable, and the regime negotiators watched him "the way a rabbit might stare at a cobra," Gebert said. He also had an uncanny capacity, honed by his study of history, to see things from the other side's point of view. Early on the talks threatened to break down when the regime demanded that Solidarity acknowledge that the government had been right to impose martial law; Solidarity countered with a demand that the regime admit that it had been wrong. Michnik, drawing on an prophetic observation he had made in 1976 (in an essay called "A New Evolutionism"), saved the day by getting both sides to agree that martial law had been a lesser evil, the greater one being a Soviet military intervention that would likely have set off an armed conflict.<sup>4</sup> The talks were

<sup>4</sup>"If one analyzes the complexity of Polish-Soviet relations," Michnik wrote in that essay, "it must be noted first of all that the interests of the Soviet political leadership, the Polish political leadership, and the Polish democratic opposition are basically concurrent. For all three parties, a Soviet military intervention in Poland would be a political disaster.... This reluctance

<sup>1</sup>Adam Michnik, *Letters from Prison and Other Essays* (University of California Press, 1985).

<sup>2</sup>"If I had to choose between Hitler and Stalin, I would pick Marlene Dietrich."

<sup>3</sup>Edited by David Ost (University of Chicago Press, 1993).



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able to proceed. "This was Adam at his very best," Gebert said.

The Round Table Agreement led, on June 4, 1989, to the first unrigged elections ever held in a country under Communist domination. Solidarity won all of the contested seats (35 percent of the total) in the lower house, or Sejm, and ninety-nine of the one hundred seats in the newly created Senate. And though it was overshadowed by the brutal Chinese suppression of the Tiananmen Square pro-democracy movement on the same day, the election became an inspiration and a model for the transformations that were soon to follow in Central and Eastern Europe.

But what exactly were these transformations? Were they revolutions or merely clamorous transitions from one-party police states to rough-and-tumble democracies in the making? The question is not just semantic. The events of 1989, particularly in Czechoslovakia, created waves of euphoria that made them feel and look like revolutions. Fear vanished almost overnight, streets were renamed, statues removed, constitutions rewritten, hated institutions like the secret police shut down. With astonishing speed, people became citizens again, getting involved in local politics, setting up small businesses, founding political parties, reviving once-banned or moribund institutions. It was a momentous shift, and it wanted a momentous word to describe it.

Calling these events "revolutions," however, bolstered expectations of swifter and more radical change that were bound to be disappointed, especially since the negotiations by which the changes were brought about left large parts of the old order intact. There were no huge purges, no show trials, and while there was a kind of "decommunization" process, it was chaotic and sometimes the wrong people were punished, while many lower-level Communist officials remained in their jobs, and some well-placed Communists profited. Those whose lives had been disrupted or ruined by the regimes were hungry for justice, and people like Michnik and Havel were left open to absurd accusations that they had "betrayed" the revolution, or even that they were somehow in cahoots with the Communists.

In a conversation in *An Uncanny Era*, from 1991, this issue leads to the first substantial disagreement between Havel and Michnik, who objects to calling the events of 1989 "revolutions" in the first place, let alone "unfinished" revolutions, as Havel suggested. Michnik admits that the street demonstrations that forced the regimes to capitulate were a kind of revolution, but what happened next, "what journalists called a 'velvet revolution,'" was aimed at restoring the rule of law, not overturning it.<sup>5</sup> "Revolution," he tells Havel,

delineates the area of permissible political maneuver; this alignment of interests defines the sphere of possible compromise."

<sup>5</sup>I have resorted to paraphrasing here for a reason. Matynia's translation of the sentence reads: "And later what journalists called a 'velvet revolution' entered upon the path of a state of law." An earlier version of the same conver-

always means discrimination, whether against political enemies or the people of the ancien régime, but the law means equality under the law. . . . Either the law is equal for everybody, or there is no law. . . . If [Communists] committed a crime. . . they will be punished, like all criminals. But if not, then they cannot be discriminated against for having been. . . in the Communist Party.

Havel's response is more sanguine. Whether you call it a revolution or not, certain remedies—even something as banal as ensuring that people excluded from decent employment under communism now get decent pensions—have to be put in place before you can say the job is done. "This doesn't have anything to do with some kind of Jacobinism or permanent revolution. It is about completing a work begun to remedy public matters."

*An Uncanny Era* is meant, in part, to illuminate a historically important friendship between Havel and Michnik, one that began during a series of secret meetings between the two men and their colleagues from Charter 77 and KOR near the top of a mountain on the Czechoslovak-Polish border in 1978. But while the rapport between them is remarkable, their differences are often more enlightening, and hint at larger differences in the movements they led.

Both men, for example, see morality as central to political change, but whereas Havel believes that political change begins with an "existential revolution" within each person, Michnik's concern seems directed outward, to the social and political consequences of acts of "moral courage." For Michnik, the problem in the post-Communist world of "real politics" is finding the proper balance between conscience and common sense, between "the ethic of conviction and the ethic of responsibility."

In any case, their differences are complementary rather than contradictory. Havel's much-mocked slogan "Truth and love must prevail over lies and hatred" is almost a mirror image of Michnik's equally controversial hope that reconciliation rather than revenge will be the hallmark of the new democracies.

The five essays by Michnik in *The Trouble with History* do more than just complement the Michnik-Havel conversations; they give us a more coherent and consistent account of Michnik's concerns. (In fact, these two books are so complementary that I found myself wondering why Yale University Press

sation, published in Michnik's *Letters from Freedom*, and translated by Jane Cave, has Michnik saying: "And subsequent events—what the journalists called 'the velvet revolution'—took place within the framework of the rule of law." "Rule of law" is almost certainly a more accurate translation of an important concept in political science that in Polish, I assume, derives from the German notion of *Rechtsstaat*, literally a state governed by laws. Matynia's somewhat awkward phrase "entered upon the path of a state of law," however, may be closer to what Michnik meant to say, that restoring "the rule of law" was the desired outcome, not the environment, of those negotiations.

didn't simply bring out a single anthology of Michnik's recent dispatches from the world of post-communism.) At the same time, they discuss in depth his credo, as someone who has made, as well as studied, history: for instance, that history is "a teacher of life"; that it is "always a conversation with the Other, the one who thinks differently, who is differently situated, . . . differently shaped by his or her social position"; that "the truth of history is often polyphonic"; that "historical wounds can only heal in a climate of free debate, in which everyone can cry out about one's own wrongs, pains, and sufferings"; and the core of his beliefs, that history is not just about the past because it is constantly recurring, and not as farce, as Marx had it, but as itself:

The world is full of inquisitors and heretics, liars and those lied to, terrorists and the terrorized. There is still someone dying at Thermopylae, someone drinking a glass of hemlock, someone crossing the Rubicon, someone drawing up a proscription list.

We see this belief most clearly explained in each of his three essays on the French Revolution, where it is sometimes hard to tell whether Michnik is talking about nineteenth-century France or twenty-first-century Poland. Whatever the case, the fact is that Michnik reads history three-dimensionally, with one eye on the past and the other on the present.

It's a pleasure to watch him at work. In the first essay, "Morality in Politics: Willy Brandt's Two Visits to Poland," he attempts to get inside the mind of the former West German chancellor who worked hard to bring about a rapprochement between East and West while virtually ignoring the dissidents. "I try to understand Brandt," Michnik writes, "a moral politician in the world of real politics. How to combine these two elements—moral values and political pragmatism? It was a dance on a thin rope."

In the title essay of *The Trouble with History*, Michnik examines in more detail something he discussed with Havel, a phenomenon he calls "the virus of anti-communism with a Bolshevik face." By this he means the resurgence of a hard-line political and moral authoritarianism that uses intimidation to stop public debate and draws on the old secret police archives to smear its enemies. It's a clear reference to the policies of the Law and Justice party, led by Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński, which dominated Polish politics in the mid-2000s. (Unfortunately the book provides no specific background and no dates for any of these essays, a serious oversight.) But in an article called "The Polish Witch Hunt" that appeared in the June 28, 2007, issue of this magazine, Michnik leveled specific criticism at the new lustration law meant to expose secret police informants. Parts of that law were struck down by the Polish Constitutional Court, but Michnik wrote that it "was only one act among many in a systematic effort by the ruling Law and Justice party and its supporters to undermine the country's democratic institutions."

It may seem odd that someone who opposed communism for most of his



adult life would find anticommunism a threat. Yet even after he had broken with communism completely, Michnik never thought of himself, or called himself, an “anti-Communist.” He preferred the term “antitotalitarian,” and it’s an important distinction. In the 1970s, he faulted Polish anti-Communists for their decision to turn away from oppositional activity because they thought change of any kind was impossible. Their hatred of the system was so intense it had paralyzed them. For Michnik, that kind of embittered passivity led nowhere.

Michnik sees post-Communist anti-communism as a right-wing phenomenon that is cropping up everywhere, in Western Europe, in Russia, and among all three major religions. It has charac-

In “The Ultras of Moral Revolution,” the first of three essays on the French Revolution, Michnik finds alarming parallels with modern Poland in the violent upheavals of the Jacobin period and the Bourbon restoration after the death of Napoleon. Both periods, though apparently tending in opposite directions, began in moderation and optimism and ended in extremism and despair. It is not an original idea, but Michnik draws from it a message tinged with a lifetime’s experience of both tyranny and its defeat:

The history of the Jacobins..., Red or White, teaches us that there is a need for ethical knowledge, that there are no honest values



Dominique Nabokov

Adam Michnik, Kraków, Poland, 1996; photograph by Dominique Nabokov

teristics that remind him of totalitarianism. This virus, he explains,

could also be called...the virus of fundamentalism, spreading the belief that by using the techniques of intimidating public opinion one can build a world without sin; and that this can only happen if the state is governed by sinless individuals who are equipped with the doctrine of the one and only correct project for organizing human relations.

With his keen eye for historical analogy, Michnik refers to the appearance in a Polish weekly (again, date, author, and publication are unnamed) of a series of articles in praise of McCarthyism and the Red Scare from the late 1940s and 1950s in the United States. This “admiration for the work of McCarthy and his followers,” Michnik writes, “illustrates well the traps that await the new democracies of the post-communist period.”

To appreciate more fully what Michnik is saying, it’s worth remembering what the long-term consequences of American anticommunism have been. McCarthyism didn’t just destroy reputations and careers; it also branded liberal and progressive ideas as “Red Fascism,” stigmatizing them to such an extent that they lost much of their legitimacy in political discourse. That stigmatization continues to this day, to the great detriment of political pluralism in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>See, for instance, Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Little, Brown, 1998).

that would justify reaching for...dishonest means and methods. This is why one cannot put people down in the name of lifting them up; this is why one cannot spread the poison of fear in the name of virtue and moral revolution; this is why one cannot push the drug of suspicion in the name of truth and cleansing.

In the final three chapters, by evoking writers like Stendhal and Chateaubriand, Michnik delves more deeply into the psychic world of the French Revolution and its aftermath, again as a way of grasping why his own world has become “so trivial, hard, and cowardly”:

I felt the desire to enter that world, now long-gone, and meet those people, to see their sadness and their angry faces, to listen to their complaints about living in their own times. I grew to like those walks with Stendhal and Chateaubriand, with Julien Sorel and Lucien Leuwen, and I became interested in their observations and anxieties. How did they perceive that transformation from grandeur into littleness, or that of bravery into intrigue and servility?

In the end, there is something very English, almost Burkean, about Michnik’s disenchantment with the idea of revolution and his fidelity to the idea of discourse and the rule of law. Toward the end of “The Ultras of Moral

Revolution,” He invokes a “different revolution,” one that is often forgotten: the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688 in England. It’s an interesting choice, because whenever one hears the words “revolution” and “English” in the same sentence, one thinks first of Oliver Cromwell and regicide. But Michnik is right: 1688 was a different kind of revolution. In that year, James II was forced off the throne because he wished to restore Catholicism as the official religion. Military matters were largely taken care of by the Dutch, who invaded more or less by invitation, and the English accepted William and Mary as the new monarchs. There was a minimum of bloodshed, and above all, it produced the Toleration Act of 1689—under which, as British historian G.M. Trevelyan wrote, “England has lived at peace with herself ever since.”

I try to understand Michnik’s attraction to this event. Does he see something of his own experience here? When he quotes Trevelyan on the men who worked out the Toleration Act, it’s hard to imagine he’s not thinking about 1989:

The men of 1689 [Trevelyan wrote] were not heroes. Few of them were even honest men. But they were very clever men, and, taught by bitter experience, they behaved at this supreme crisis as very clever men do not always behave, with sense and moderation.

Michnik knows that the Toleration Act was not perfect. Some saw it as giving them the right to live according to their conscience. Others, he says, quoting Trevelyan, saw it as “a necessary compromise with error.” But it was a compromise that brought an end to “mass sufferings, hatreds and wrongs.”

Trevelyan’s conclusion, quoted by Michnik, has a particular poignancy these days:

After a thousand years, religion was at length released from the obligation to practice cruelty on principle, by the admission that it is the incorrigible nature of man to hold different opinions on speculative subjects.

And Michnik’s conclusion is equally poignant:

We the malcontents dream of just such a patchwork of compromise and good sense. We the malcontents do not want further revolutions in a country that has not yet recovered from the last several of them.

Michnik’s best hopes for Poland are rooted in his dream from the underground days of Solidarity, when he saw his struggle not as a “fight for a perfect society that’s free of conflicts, but for a conflictual society in which conflicts can be resolved within the rules of the democratic game.” In this sense, I see Michnik as an almost Miltonic figure, who understands that the greatness of a country—“a noble and a puissant nation,” in Milton’s words—lies not in its military might, but in its capacity, even in a time of war and grave external threats, to engage in fearless, unfettered public debate about the great ideas of the day.

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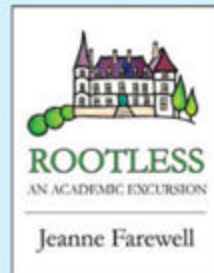
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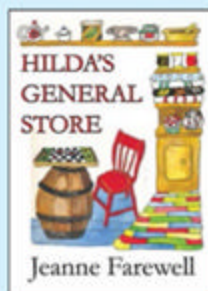
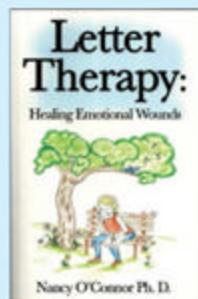
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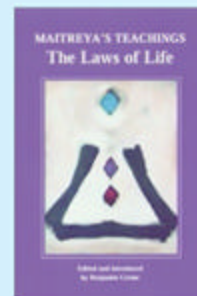
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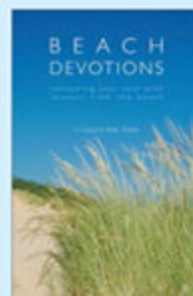
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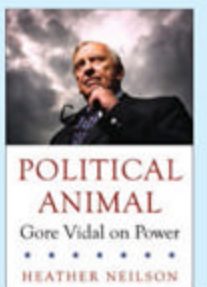
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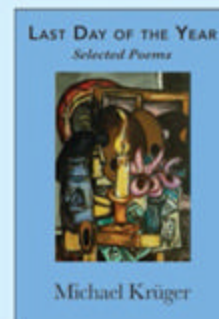
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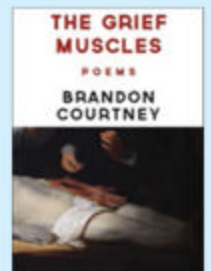
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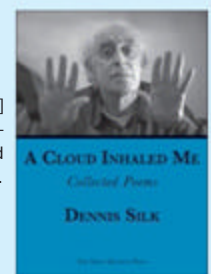
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# Jonathan Miller and the Kinds of Genius

Colin McGinn

## On Further Reflection: 60 Years of Writing

by Jonathan Miller.  
Newbold on Stour: Skyscraper,  
326 pp., £20.00

The usual cliché “polymath” does not do justice to the peculiar case history that is the life of Jonathan Miller. In his own telling, he begins as an unremarkable schoolboy at a semimystical progressive school dedicated to something called “leading-out,” where wet paper was insisted upon in art class. “It had to be wet paper,” he reports, “for dry paper gave hard lines and the art mistress explained that there were no hard lines in nature. ‘Moisten your papers,’ she would cry flutily, and the class would set about the ritual douche.” The resulting blurring was intended to express “the confluence of the great subconscious.” Miller sums this period up thus:

After six months of this life I had been seduced into a womby confusion of thought and action which boded ill for my academic future. When my father discovered that my knowledge of mathematics was confined to an inaccurate version of the French multiplication tables he removed me to a conventional cap-and-blazer establishment. Here, apart from an impressive showing on all questions bearing upon Manu, I shaped up as a high-grade moron incapable of understanding even schoolboy conundrums.

As they say, an inauspicious beginning, though not one without drawable lessons.

Despite this early anti-education, he ends up at Cambridge studying medicine, intending to go into neuropsychology (his father was a psychiatrist). At the university he was a member of the Apostles, the secret club reserved only for the most brilliant, and was clearly an outstanding student. A medical career beckoned. But, he says,

I was unexpectedly diverted into show-biz, having yielded to an invitation to collaborate with Peter Cook, Alan Bennett and Dudley Moore in writing and performing in a late night review which was entitled *Beyond the Fringe*.

And here the case history makes a characteristic swerve: not only does Miller perform competently in the youthful comedy troupe, he and the others emerge as the most original and influential comic force in the postwar era. They are a huge hit. The man is funny and also a biting satirist—at least the equal of the others in his glittering band. In *On Further Reflection* he reproduces his pastiche of Shakespeare’s historical drama, which contains such gems as: “Take this my hand, and you fair Essex this/And with this bond we’ll cry anon/And shout Jack Cock o’London to the foe.” Or: “Is it botched up then, Master Puke?” Or: “Now is steel ’twixt gut and bladder interposed.” The studious and serious neuropsychologist has fallen accidentally into the role of star comedian, as if he just couldn’t help it—as if it just



Jonathan Miller, London, 1967; photograph by Ian Berry

slipped out. He finds himself performing on Broadway instead of in a dingy hospital in the Midlands.

Soon he is writing for *The New Yorker*, a trenchant piece on television and the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and for the newly formed *New York Review of Books*, contributing a thoughtful essay on Lenny Bruce. He begins appearing regularly on *The Dick Cavett Show*. Then another swerve intervenes:

Soon after my return to London my somewhat simple-minded intention to go back to clinical research was thwarted by the unexpected invitation to edit and present BBC Television’s arts series *Monitor*. After doing this for a year I was given the opportunity to direct two films for the BBC—*The Drinking Party* and *The Death of Socrates*, both based on Plato’s dialogues. And after this I was allowed to make a film of *Alice in Wonderland*.

The dingy hospital is postponed again. All his assignments meet with general acclaim—and he is still only in his twenties. Doctor, comedian, critic, director, and all-around intellectual—surely some neurological abnormality

underlies Jonathan Miller’s polymorphous proficiency. He is already, and apparently effortlessly, the master of all manner of trades, and the jack of none. And this is just the warm-up.

His next project, this time freely chosen, is to do historical research on animal magnetism, the idea of an invisible force exerted by animals that was behind mesmerism and hypnotism. He produces two long scholarly articles, one of them reproduced in *On Further Reflection*. The essay is a model of intellectual history, containing such erudite sentences as:

Mesmer, however, did not invent the idea of a universal fluid, but took his inspiration from an idea which had already been formulated by Isaac Newton. In his *General Scholium* to the third book of the *Principia*, Newton postulated the existence of an aether which mediated the transmission of light, gravity and magnetism.

There follows a detailed account of the life and work of the British mesmerist John Elliotson, whom Miller both venerates and excoriates for his ambition and his egotism. Here we see the reclusive scholar beneath the star.

In 1976 it is back to television for the

series *The Body in Question*, where Miller mingles his training as a doctor with philosophical and psychological reflections on proprioception (“body image”). He also produces a book based on the series, which I recall as a major television event in the UK. Then he presents a series called *States of Mind*, in which he interviews researchers in cognitive science and other students of the mind, including Sir Ernst Gombrich, his interview with whom is reprinted here. His considerable knowledge of art history is evident. Once again fluent mastery is the norm, combined with an easygoing charm and a gorgeous, sonorous voice.

It is really only a matter of time until he establishes himself as a distinguished director of Shakespeare’s plays (as well as other plays) and—perhaps most remarkably of all—as a world-famous director of operas. Again, these projects seem to choose him, not he them: that dingy hospital becomes ever more remote. One feels by this point that if he had by chance been invited to join Fermilab he would have emerged as a distinguished physicist. While engaged in nonstop international theatrical work, he keeps up his interests in philosophy, psychology, brain science, art history, photography, and almost anything else you care to mention. One runs out of hyperbole trying to sum up the full magnitude of what we might call “Miller’s syndrome”: remarkable brilliance, all the time, about anything, anywhere. He is duly knighted for services to the arts, which seems the least the Queen could do.

I first met Jonathan in 1989 in Oxford. He wrote to me after reading a book of mine, *Mental Content*, a dense and technical treatise in the philosophy of mind. It was, he said, his holiday reading while vacationing in Greece. After that we met regularly, mostly in New York, where I had moved in 1990. He was usually directing an opera or a play, or was the special guest of some prestigious institute.

We rarely talked about his work; he mainly wanted to talk philosophy. For all his talents, his conversational talent is probably the most striking—and not just as a speaker but also as a listener. The verbal fluency, power of recall, and range of reference are astounding—as are also the sudden flights into sublime and pungent humor. (I well remember his backseat rendition of Pete and Dud’s supremely vulgar “This Bloke Came Up To Me.”) We had a particularly good conversation about religion that became part of his celebrated BBC4 series *Atheism: A Rough History of Disbelief*. And I never tired of his impersonation of Bertrand Russell (“Moore at that time had a very beautiful face”).

*On Further Reflection* consists of a compendium of writings over a sixty-year period. Apart from the topics already mentioned, there are pieces of varying length on America, mirrors and reflective surfaces in general, the “afterlife” of artistic works, the nature of human action, camouflage, mental images, seeing and looking, Eadweard Muybridge and the early cinema, the

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filming of novels, shadows, gestures, and speech acts. The pieces are always concise and insightful, clever and erudite, often very funny.

The longest essay in the book, "The Afterlife of Art," perceptively discusses the way a work of art, once removed from the time and place of its creation, takes on a new life and meaning, and is no longer the work that it once was. Part of a church altar, say, ripped from its place in the overall artwork, then placed in a museum in a foreign land and gazed upon by people of vastly different sensibility from those who experienced it in its original setting, is a totally transformed object. Originally a religious accessory, intended to evoke devotional sentiment, it has become a displaced and exotic object of aesthetic contemplation, possibly part of an art-loving expensive vacation. Similarly for Michelangelo's placing of an equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius on a pedestal in the center of the Piazza del Campidoglio in Rome at the time of the Renaissance, cited by Miller.

Miller argues persuasively that a production of a Shakespeare play can never in principle be "authentic," simply because our eyes and ears are not those of the original playgoers. A play must be interpreted anew whenever it is staged; and given the absence of stage directions from the author, all we have to go on are the words spoken by the characters in the play. He concludes:

For all these reasons it seems right and proper to describe the renewed existence of these works of art as afterlives, and to see them not simply as faint or attenuated versions of their *previous* existences, but as full-blooded representations of their *subsequent* existence.

He also interestingly writes: "The actor's performance as a particular character requires *hypothesis*," comparing this to the way a scientist invents a hypothesis and goes on to test it. "To borrow Karl Popper's phrase, [the] process is one of conjecture and refutation alternating with one another as the rehearsal develops."

In this need for continual interpretation Miller sees the longevity of a Shakespearean play: for the play admits of, and calls for, fresh interpretation as times and culture change. He says: "The amplitude of Shakespeare's imagination admits so many possible interpretations that his work has enjoyed an extraordinary afterlife unforeseeable by the author at the time of writing." In this rich essay, the experienced theater director and the lifelong philosopher come together to suggest a perspective that is surely unrivaled.

Equally impressive is the essay "Doing Things," in which Miller's fascination with human action is given free rein. He is particularly taken with the philosopher Brian O'Shaughnessy's well-known idea of "sub-intentional actions"—those we perform without intending to and often without any awareness, for example, rolling the tongue around the mouth or licking the lips or drumming the fingers or tapping the feet. Breathing is an interesting case: while generally quite sub-intentional, you can intentionally hold your breath or breathe deeply

or expel air rapidly. But you can't do any of these kinds of things with your heartbeat, or intentionally make yourself sneeze (though you can intentionally cough, oddly). Blinking is usually completely reflexive, but it can also take the form of a deliberate wink.

The category of action is thus very broad and various, ranging from the conscious and deliberate to the unconscious and automatic. Crying, for example, can run the full gamut—from unstoppable tears to the staged crying of an expert actor. When some philosophers have defined actions as movements of the body that are done intentionally, they have ignored a large area of human action that fails to fit



Jonathan Miller directing a BBC production of Mozart's *Così Fan Tutte*, London, 1985

that definition. And how do they explain the actions of animals that don't even have full-blown intentions?

Is there any unity to Jonathan Miller's wide range of interests? Is there a single theme running through his infinite variety? If there is, it is not immediately visible, and he tells us nothing that would help to identify it. But I think I can detect a recurring motif, and it characterizes both his interests and his life. In fact, I have just referred to it: *action*. Not only is he interested in the minutiae of everyday human actions, their mechanics and purpose; he is also interested in how actions are depicted—by actors, film, and painting. As a director, he teaches his performers to enact the unconscious doings that people engage in all the time—the twitches and vacant gazes, the tapping and scratching. He is fascinated, too, by how painters suggest a sense of movement by depicting a person in mid-action. And he lovingly describes the early photographic efforts by Muybridge and others to capture exactly how a horse runs.

Miller is himself a natural performer and mimic, both onstage and off. He is also very impressed with the notion of speech acts, as developed by J. L. Austin and John Searle—the idea that speaking is a kind of doing. When, for example, you say, "I promise," you actually do the

thing you are describing—you promise (this is called a "performative"). Even when he is discussing visual perception, he notes that looking is a type of action, and that there are several species of looking. We look at things, through things, into things, intently, vacantly. The eyes actively skip and jump (so-called saccadic eye movement) as they construct a perceptual world. Our muscles are incessantly relaxing and contracting, making their tiny adjustments: we are not passive perceivers but endlessly active agents. Miller is, above all, a student of human and animal behavior, at its most elemental. His interest lies less in what makes us tick than in how we kick—the outer, not the inner. He would surely agree with Wittgenstein's famous dictum, quoting Goethe: "In the beginning was the deed."

There is a touch of irony in this, for two reasons. The first is that the Jonathan I know does not himself seem a devotee of motor skills: he plays no musical instrument and has no athletic skills to speak of (he doesn't even swim, unlike his friend from childhood Oliver Sacks). He is not a man who spends any of his time developing his own ability to act—although he is a remarkably expressive and resourceful performer when he rehearses actors and singers. He prefers to read, think, and talk. He is an opera director who neither sings nor reads music. Still, in recent years, as if to prove me wrong, he has done many pieces of sculpture, some with a welding torch, as well as abstract collages and other artworks exhibited at a London gallery.

A second irony is that Jonathan seems to have led, by his own account, a rather accidental, unwilling life. Instead of actively pursuing a certain professional goal, he has allowed himself to be diverted, seduced, and sidetracked—often responding to the invitations of others. It is as if concerted action directed toward satisfying his own deepest passions has eluded him, as he yields to the appeals of producers, museum directors, publishers. His major achievements have been, not *sub-intentional* exactly, but *semi-intentional*.

He never meant to go into show business as a performer and director, or curate art exhibitions, or produce operas—he was just nudged into doing these things. ("I would probably never have gone into opera if I had not been invited by Roger Norrington's wife, Sue, to direct a children's production of Benjamin Britten's *Noye's Fludde* in the Round House in Camden Town.") He performed these roles successfully and brilliantly, mainly at the enticement of others, while not making much of the deeper springs of his more self-directed actions—becoming a working neurologist, a scientist, a philosopher. His brilliance and versatility as a performer may have thus interfered with his success as an independent agent—as the captain of his own destiny. He has excelled at what he never quite intended, and since he has indeed excelled, who could object?

Is there anything Dr. Miller does that he does not do well? This is a thoroughly enjoyable and stimulating collection of writings by one of the most accomplished men of our time.

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# Malamud's Secrets

Edward Mendelson

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## 1.

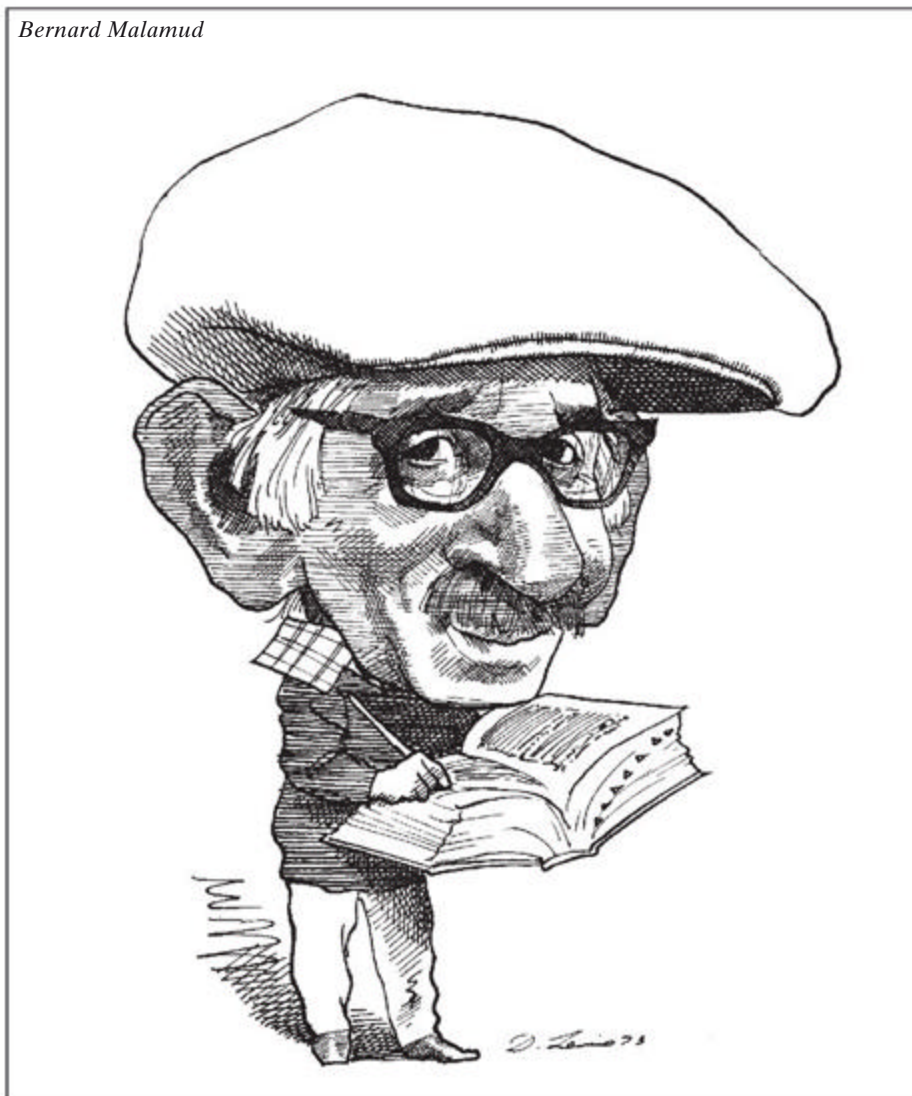
Bernard Malamud gave many answers to the question asked by an Italian thief of a Jewish grocer in *The Assistant* (1957): "What I like to know is what is a Jew anyway?" In lectures titled "Imaginative Writing and the Jewish Experience" or "Hunting for Jewishness," or in his acceptance speech for B'nai B'rith's Jewish Heritage Award, his answers were straightforward and uplifting: Jews, through their sufferings, "know that...the rewards of life...are centered about the development of a spirituality that raises man to his highest being." A Jew was inherently a mensch. "How can a man be a Jew if he isn't a man?" asks one of his characters. To be a Jew is to be fully human: "Every man is a Jew though he may not know it."

Malamud's critics take for granted that Jewishness was his subject matter. They either admire his vivid tales of immigrant shopkeepers and their wayward native-born children or they lament his portraits of Jews who insist on suffering. Philip Roth may have been the only reader who deduced that Malamud's Jewishness was not what it seemed, that it was driven by motives he never talked about.

In Roth's *The Ghost Writer* (1979) the young Nathan Zuckerman, like the young Roth who visited Malamud in Vermont, makes a pilgrimage to the Berkshires to meet the great novelist E. I. Lonoff. Zuckerman explains that he hopes to learn Lonoff's "secret," "the clues to his puzzle." Lonoff is an artist-genius who has cultivated the remote, dignified manner of Henry James—in every way like the Malamud who wrote of himself, "One has his gift—the *donnée*," and who answered only to the WASPish "Bern," not the Jewish "Bernie." Lonoff, Zuckerman says, is "the Jew who got away," away not only from the pogroms of Russia, but also from the ethnic ferments of New York and the wildness of his Jewish antithesis, Felix Abravanel, Roth's fictional amalgam of Saul Bellow and Norman Mailer. Lonoff escaped all this, Zuckerman observes, yet "still all you write about are Jews." "Proving what?" is Lonoff's deflecting reply, to which Zuckerman says cautiously, "That...is what I'd like to ask you."

Malamud hid the clues to his puzzle with one hand while displaying them with the other. The Library of America's edition of his novels and stories—two volumes recently published, a third in preparation—makes it clear that his half-concealed secret was an inward drama of ambition, guilt, and expiation

Bernard Malamud



in which his Jewishness had private meanings very different from the pieties he provided for B'nai B'rith.

Malamud wrote in sculpted sentences, compressing Yiddish diction into a demotic modernist prose-poetry: "Broke in him something.... Broke what breaks." "The rabbi's trousers were a week from ragged." "Don't you understand what it means human?" His paragraphs moved with concentrated efficiency toward unexpected endings. "I am an inventor," he said. "I am an imaginative writer. Some of my writing is creation from the word go"—unlike what he called the "autobiographical" writings of Roth, Bellow, and Mailer.

He seems to have meant what he said, but the best of his fictions, from his novel about a midwestern baseball star, *The Natural* (1952), to the polymorphous fantasies of *Pictures of Fidelman* (1969) and his fantastic animal tales, "The Jewbird" and "Talking Horse," insisted on telling truths about himself.

## 2.

Malamud's parents, after fleeing pogroms in the Ukraine, met and married in Brooklyn, where Bernard was born in 1914. His father was a grocer whose shops were always failing. At thirteen Malamud came home to find his mother on the floor, having tried to kill herself by drinking disinfectant; she died in a mental hospital a few years later. Malamud's younger brother was twice hospitalized with schizophrenia. Many years later, Malamud told a friend that he kept his obsessive-seeming lists of chores, royalties, and everything else "to keep myself from going crazy."

His storytelling impulse began early.

I could on occasion be a good little liar who sometimes found it a burden to tell the truth. Once my father called me a "bluffer," enraging me because I had meant to tell him a simple story, not one that had elaborated itself into a lie.

At Erasmus Hall High School and City College—two great incubators of Jewish writers in the 1930s—his teachers encouraged his talent. His father had bought him a twenty-volume children's encyclopedia when he recovered from a nearly fatal pneumonia, but he now discouraged his impractical ambitions as a writer. A few months after graduating from college Malamud failed the exam to become a permanent substitute teacher because he deliberately oversimplified his writing style—the first of many instances when he took pains to defeat himself.

At twenty-seven he met Ann deChirara, the lapsed-Catholic daughter of educated, artistic Italian immigrants, and began an almost four-year courtship. He warned her against marrying him: "Though I love you and shall love you more, most of my strength will be devoted to realizing myself as an artist." Finally, their letters suggest, she pressured him into getting married—in the secular setting of the Ethical Culture Society—while letting him think the decision was his. His father stopped speaking to him when he married a gentile, relenting only when a son was born two years later.

After Malamud married, most Jews in his fiction were gentle, sexless, and self-sacrificing, most Italians criminal, sensual, or crazy. When he wrote about

acts and feelings that he despised in himself, he attributed them to an Italian, apparently unaware of his own face behind the mask.

With his wife's help—she typed two hundred application letters—Malamud, now with a Columbia M.A., got a teaching job at Oregon State College in 1949. There he burned his first attempt at a novel and began writing *The Natural*, his first published book, which appeared when he was thirty-eight. Before this, he had written stories mostly about Jewish grocers, waiters, actors: unpropitious subjects for a writer aiming at greatness.<sup>1</sup> *The Natural* has no Jews at all. "Bern needed a success and wanted a theme which would be successful," recalled his lifelong editor, Robert Giroux, and "baseball was the great American sport."

Roy Hobbs, "the natural," is a portrait of the artist in baseball uniform. Hobbs breaks decorum by announcing to the crowd at the stadium, "I will do my best—the best I am able—to be the greatest there ever was in the game." Malamud's daughter often heard him tell the bathroom mirror, "Someday I'm going to win." He wanted greatness both as a popular writer and as a maker of high art, so he shaped Roy Hobbs's story as a grail legend, lifted, he said, from Jessie L. Weston's *Ritual and Romance*, with coach "Pop" Fisher as the fisher king. This was the same winning strategy used by the greatest winner of all, T. S. Eliot, in *The Waste Land*.

Like many artists who imagine themselves servants of the muse, devoting their lives to their vocation, Malamud was tenaciously ambitious, ready to sacrifice anyone and anything to his art, but mortified when he debased his art for the sake of popular success. *The Natural* conceals a rueful allegory of its own creation: a book written for sales and success ends with its hero disgracing himself by selling out, as in the Black Sox scandal of 1919. In the closing lines, a boy asks Hobbs, "Say it ain't true, Roy," and the disgraced knight "lifted his hands to his face and wept many bitter tears."

The inner crisis provoked in Malamud by writing *The Natural* reshaped his career. A few months after the book appeared, he wrote a story, "Riding Pants," which he never published; it was printed in a posthumous collection edited by Giroux, *The People and Uncollected Stories* (1989). It contains most of the clues that Nathan Zuckerman was looking for.

Herm (i.e., Bern), son of an angry widowed butcher, hates the blood and feathers of the butcher shop and refuses to help his father. He only wants to ride horses, and manages to buy a pair of riding pants. His father locks up the riding pants, but Herm retrieves them. Malamud doesn't explain that Girlie, the horse Herm learns to ride, "the roan they told him he wasn't ready for," is Pegasus, winged horse of the muses, just as he doesn't explain in another story that someone named Ginzburg is the Angel of Death.

<sup>1</sup>He collected his stories in *The Magic Barrel* (1958), *Idiots First* (1963), and *Rembrandt's Hat* (1973).



One day Herm wakes to find his riding pants missing again, and watches crying “as his father chopped the tightly rolled pants as if they were a bologna.” Intent on killing his father’s cat in revenge, Herm almost gets himself locked in the freezer. The next morning the butcher, scrimping on paper to save money, wraps up some liver that leaks blood on a customer’s mink coat. As the gentile woman denounces him, the father sinks into quiet despair. Herm thinks about “all the places he could go where there were horses,” but then puts on his father’s bloody apron and ties the strings behind him. “They covered where the riding pants had been, but he felt as though he still had them on.”

The point of the story is that *The Natural* betrayed not only Malamud’s art but also his father, and that he must now expiate his betrayal by descending from the gentiles’ Parnassus to his Jewish father’s grocery—though secretly and invisibly preserving his artist’s sensibility. Malamud now began work on *The Assistant*, in which he transformed the story of “Riding Pants” into something suitable for public consumption. Morris Bober, the passive, gentle grocer apparently modeled on the outer life of Malamud’s father, takes the place of the violent, furious butcher who threatened Malamud’s inner life, and the repentant Italian criminal Frank Alpine takes the role of Herm. The father who chops up something bologna-shaped that belongs to his son is angry about something more primal than art. Sex in Malamud’s fiction is always either illicit or betraying; Frank Alpine loves but rapes the grocer’s daughter; married couples go to bed only when one partner is in love with someone else.

Like *The Natural*, *The Assistant* is an allegory of its own creation. Frank Alpine and the violent Ward Minogue rob Bober in his grocery. Both are masked. Later a secretly repentant Frank insists on working for Bober for little or no pay, and is awed and transformed by the grocer’s gentleness. After Bober dies, Frank gets himself circumcised and becomes a Jew—ending the novel that Malamud wrote to appease his father’s spirit by adopting his Jewishness.

Bober’s answer to Frank’s question, “What is a Jew anyway,” is that “a Jew must believe in the Law,” hurt no one, and “suffer for the Law.” When Frank asks, “What do you suffer for,” Bober answers calmly: “I suffer for you.” As critics noticed from the start, Malamud portrayed his father as a Jewish Ukrainian Christ. He was annoyed when friends told him *The Assistant* was his Christian book, but in fact it half withdraws from the Jewishness it embraces. Like chapter 23 of Luke, it tells the story of a self-sacrificing victim who suffers together with a repentant and an unrepentant thief. Art was the product of imagination; Jewishness was secondary. “Imagination makes authority,” says a writer in Malamud’s story, “Man in the Drawer.” “When I write about Jews comes out stories, so I write about Jews. Is not important that I am half-Jew.”

Malamud’s most complex allegory about Jewishness, his father, and his art was “The Silver Crown,” a story he wrote in 1972. The father of a rational, secular science teacher is dying of cancer; the teacher, in despair, visits a shabby rabbi who claims to heal the sick by making a silver crown—it costs \$986—and saying blessings over it.

The teacher, disgusted by this mystical mumbo-jumbo but desperate to save his father, demands to see the crown before paying the enormous price. The rabbi shows him a mirror with a vision of a shining crown. The teacher is convinced it is all a trick, but pays anyway. His father gets no better; the rabbi decamps; the teacher later sees him in a new hat and caftan. Outraged, he demands his money back, but the rabbi says, “Think of your father who loves you.” The teacher answers, “He hates me, the son-of-a-bitch, I hope he croaks.” The rabbi cries, “Murderer,” and the father dies an hour later.

Jewishness, in “The Silver Crown,” embodies two kinds of fiction: it is both the rabbi’s manipulative swindle and the luminous vision in the mirror. The Jewishness that Malamud had taken



Bernard Malamud, Bennington, Vermont, 1971; photograph by Jill Krentenz

up in guilty service to a dying father granted him artistic vision: “When I write about Jews comes out stories.” But he also disdained this vision, and his disdain was murderous.

### 3.

Malamud’s third novel, *A New Life* (1961), tells the comic and romantic story of S. Levin, a New Yorker who (like Malamud) takes a teaching job at a state college in the Pacific Northwest. After many comic indignities that end in his getting fired, Levin leaves town with his lover, the wife of a despised colleague. The book quietly insists that although Levin happens to be a Jew, the book is not about Jewishness. He is identified as a Jew only once, when his pro-Semitic lover explains that her husband had hired him because she had picked his application out of the pile: his photo reminded her of a Jewish boy who had been kind when she was unhappy. Many people dislike Levin; no one dislikes him because he is Jewish.

An unspoken theme of *A New Life* is that Jewishness doesn’t matter. Malamud’s next novel, *The Fixer* (1966), made amends for this slight by telling the harrowing story of a man persecuted for years solely for his Jewishness. Yakov Bok, in prerevolutionary Kiev, is made foreman of a brickyard by an anti-Semitic nobleman who is unaware he has hired a Jew. Soon Bok is arrested for the ritual murder of a Christian boy, a false charge—the “blood libel”—that no one believes but that serves tsarist

imperialism. The novel won the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award, but for all its indignation and horror, it is the shallowest of Malamud’s books.

Printed in the same Library of America volume as *A New Life*, it proves to be the same story, with the tone transformed from the gentle comedy of the earlier book into the righteous anger of *J’Accuse*. In both books a young Jew, having made a mess of his life, goes to another city to start over, enduring troubles on the way. Each squeamishly refuses a woman’s offer of sex, Levin repelled by an injured breast, Bok by menstrual blood. Each lucks into a job but performs it with moral fervor, Levin working to expose a student plagiarist, Bok keeping a watchful eye on thieving workmen. Each suffers for his generosity, Levin for trying to improve the curriculum, Bok for his kindness to an old Jew that leads to his own arrest. Both are told that the one man who shares their convictions has killed himself. Both are disgraced and politicized. In the penultimate sentence someone waves; in the final sentence someone shouts:

As they drove by he [Levin’s lover’s husband] tore a rectangle of paper from the back of the camera and waved it aloft.

“Got your picture!”

One or two waved at Yakov. Some shouted his name.

What mattered was artistic form; content was interchangeable.

In 1974, Philip Roth wrote in these pages about *The Fixer*:

I know of no serious authors who have chronicled physical brutality and fleshly mortification in such detail and at such length, and who likewise have taken a single defenseless innocent and constructed almost an entire book out of the relentless violations suffered by that character at the hands of cruel and perverse captors, other than Malamud, the Marquis de Sade, and the pseudonymous author of *The Story of O*.<sup>2</sup>

Janna Malamud Smith, in her shrewdly engaging memoir, *My Father Is a Book* (2006), quotes a notebook Malamud kept at twenty-three:

Is morality one of the results of men[']s tendency towards masochism and sadism:

- A) A man fails repeatedly in life
- B) Unconsciously he tends to punish himself for his failures
- C) One form of doing so is to . . . blame the failure on himself because . . . he did or did not do something he should or should not have done.
- D) Soon he is blaming himself . . . for not propitiating these external forces which by now have become a morality.

Malamud’s lifelong theme was his impulse to propitiate the external forces embodied in his father and his father’s Jewishness. As he grew older, he increasingly took on the role of agent of those forces, exerting their control on his students and children.

<sup>2</sup>“Imagining Jews,” *The New York Review*, October 3, 1974.

Among students and friends, he defended the fathers whose cruelties he exposed in his fiction. Philip Davis, in his admiring but clear-sighted biography, *Bernard Malamud: A Writer’s Life* (2007), reports that Malamud got into an argument with an undergraduate class about his story “My Son, the Murderer,” in which a father harasses his depressed son. Malamud insisted that the father’s motives were pure and the son’s culpably resistant; he knew this because he had written it. The students insisted that the story said the opposite of what he intended. Afterward, Malamud was silent for a long time before saying, “They’re right.”

“What sadism he had,” his daughter reports, “would lead him to humiliate others occasionally.” When she brought home a boyfriend, her father conducted “a show trial” proving the young man’s ignorance of spelling and pronunciation. In Malamud’s fiction, fathers are always humiliating daughters and their lovers, and are humiliated in turn by their daughters’ uncontrollable sex lives. In “The Magic Barrel” the matchmaker’s daughter is “wild, without shame”; in “God’s Wrath” the sexton’s daughter turns prostitute. The night before her wedding Malamud told his daughter, “I wish you were marrying someone Jewish.”

His best students loved him. He told others they would never be writers and pointedly ignored them when they wept. He ordered a student to tie his shoe, to teach her “humility.” A friend at Bennington rebuked him for hurting colleagues’ feelings and reputations for purposes he called “humane.” What others saw as cruelty, Malamud saw as service to art and truth. He told a friend, “I am one of those strange creatures, a good man.”

### 4.

The third Library of America volume of Malamud’s work will contain his last three novels—all mixed successes—and his later stories, each more compressed, deft, and unsettling than the last. *The Tenants* (1971) is another of his fictions about art. The tenants are a Jewish novelist and a black would-be writer, the last two residents in a building that its owner hopes to demolish. The black writer, who describes life in the raw, stands in for “autobiographical” novelists like Bellow or Mailer; the Jewish writer hears (or thinks he hears) him repeating Hemingway’s taunt to the literati: “How do you like it now, gentlemen?” For the Jewish writer, “Art is the glory and only a schmuck thinks otherwise.” Both are too demoralized to finish their books, and the crumbling building they refuse to leave is a literary culture soon to be demolished by commercialism.

*Dubin’s Lives* (1979), about a biographer with Malamud’s marriage and ambition, is an extended display of personal humiliation, the hidden goal of which is aesthetic glory. William Dubin, like Malamud, and like Lonoff in *The Ghost Writer*, has an affair with a student less than half his age. In the novel as in life, the young woman decisively humiliates the older writer on their secret trip to Venice. In the novel she dislikes the smell of Venice and asks Dubin why he brought her there; he says he “thought it might rouse up a bit of magic and blow it



around.” Malamud’s deepest wish in his later years seems to have been for humiliations he could transmute into art. (The same wish drives his late stories “In Retirement” and “The Model,” about old men who take pains to get themselves humiliated by young women.) Revering Thomas Mann, Malamud brought his young student

to Venice so that she could play elusive Dionysiac Tazio to his doomed Apollonian von Aschenbach.

Malamud’s last completed novel, *God’s Grace* (1982), is another of his fantasias on fathers, sons, Jewishness, and murder, a variation on the themes of “The Silver Crown.” A scientist, Calvin Cohn, sole human survivor of

nuclear apocalypse, teaches language to the apes, one of whom he adopts as a son. The son prefers the Christian name Gottlob to the Hebrew name Buz (from Genesis 22, the firstborn of Uz) but the novel uses his Hebrew name when, reversing and inverting the story of Abraham and Isaac, he makes a sacrifice of his father.

Malamud insisted to the end that his books were inventive, not autobiographical, even the novel he began writing at fifty-seven about William Dubin, aged fifty-seven. Three years before he died at seventy-one in 1985, Malamud suffered a stroke during surgery. When he woke, a nurse asked his name. “William,” he said. His age? “Fifty-seven.” □

# The War on Poverty: Was It Lost?

Christopher Jencks

## Legacies of the War on Poverty

edited by Martha J. Bailey and Sheldon Danziger.  
Russell Sage, 309 pp., \$39.95 (paper)

This administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America. I urge this Congress and all Americans to join with me in that effort. It will not be a short or easy struggle, no single weapon or strategy will suffice, but we shall not rest until that war is won.

—Lyndon Johnson, State of the Union Address, January 8, 1964

Some years ago, the federal government declared war on poverty, and poverty won.

—Ronald Reagan, State of the Union Address, January 25, 1988

Lyndon Johnson became president in November 1963. In January 1964 he committed the United States to a war on poverty. In August he sought and gained authority to expand the war in Vietnam. Of course, the War on Poverty was only a figure of speech—a political and economic promise, not a war from which young men would return in body bags. Nonetheless, most Americans look back on the two wars as kindred failures. Both have had an exemplary part in the disillusionment with government that has been reshaping American politics since the 1970s. Asked about their impression of the War on Poverty, Americans are now twice as likely to say “unfavorable” as “favorable.” In one poll, given four alternative ways of describing how much the War on Poverty reduced poverty, 20 percent chose “a major difference,” 41 percent chose “a minor difference,” 13 percent chose “no difference,” and 23 percent chose “made things worse.”\*

*Legacies of the War on Poverty* is a set of nine studies, edited by Martha Bailey and Sheldon Danziger, that assess the successes and failures of the diverse strategies that Johnson and his successors adopted to reduce poverty. The chapters are packed with evidence, make judicious judgments, and suggest a higher ratio of success to failure than opinion polls do.

\*John Halpin and Karl Agne, “50 Years after LBJ’s War on Poverty,” *Half in Ten/Center for American Progress* (January 2014), pp. 21–22. Additional footnotes appear in the Web version of this article at [www.nybooks.com](http://www.nybooks.com).



Lyndon Johnson campaigning in Illinois in 1964, the year he declared ‘war on poverty’

Before discussing specific anti-poverty strategies, however, I must note one major gap in *Legacies*. The War on Poverty was more than just a bundle of programs; it was Johnson’s bid for a place in history. He announced an “unconditional” commitment to do whatever was necessary to raise the incomes of the poor. He also realized that no one really knew how to eliminate poverty without resorting to politically unacceptable methods, like just sending checks to everyone who was poor. When he said that “no single weapon or strategy will suffice,” he was warning Congress and the country that success would require trial and error. When he added that “we shall not rest until that war is won,” he was promising that even if some of his early initiatives failed he would not cut and run but would instead try something new.

Johnson also knew that he would have to leave the White House before success was achieved, although he did not know that he would be gone in only five years. In addition, he knew that a State of the Union Address could not bind his successors to continuing his efforts. Winning a war on poverty therefore depended on his ability to persuade Congress and his fellow citizens that eliminating poverty was a moral imperative. If he could do that, future presidents and legislators would pursue the War on Poverty as a matter of political self-interest. Otherwise, poverty would persist.

Johnson was driven from office in 1968, not by the failure of his War on Poverty but by the failure of his war in Vietnam. The next two presidents, Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, were

Republicans who had never worried much about the poor. Yet despite that fact, the War on Poverty continued after Johnson went back to his ranch. Democrats retained control of Congress for another twelve years, and many of them remained committed to reducing poverty.

As a result, some of today’s most important antipoverty programs, such as food stamps, Supplemental Security Income (a guaranteed minimum income for the elderly and disabled), and Section 8 rent subsidies for poor tenants in private housing, were either launched or dramatically expanded between 1969 and 1980. Had Johnson not put poverty reduction at the heart of the Democrats’ political agenda in 1964, it is hard to imagine that congressional Democrats would have made antipoverty programs a political priority even after Republicans regained control of the White House. This is the big story about the War on Poverty, which provides the setting within which the war’s specific programs need to be assessed.

Given that the War on Poverty was a commitment to eliminating it, the most obvious measure of the war’s success or failure is how the poverty rate has changed since 1964. Bailey and Danziger argue that just looking at changes in the poverty rate is a “simplistic” approach to assessing the War on Poverty, and in one sense they are right. If you want to know how well programs like Head Start or food stamps worked, or how many full-time jobs they created, the reduction in poverty over the past half-century is not a sensible measure.

But Bailey and Danziger’s argument is more fundamental. They object to using trends in poverty as a measure of the war’s success because the prev-

alence of poverty depends not just on the success or failure of policies aimed at reducing it but also on other independent economic and demographic forces, like the decline in unskilled men’s real wages and the rising number of single-parent families. They are right about this. But Johnson’s promise to eliminate poverty was not contingent on favorable or even neutral economic and demographic trends. His promise was “unconditional,” because he wanted his country to make a moral commitment to end the suffering that poverty causes.

Bailey and Danziger also give a second reason for not using the poverty rate to measure the War on Poverty’s success, which is that the official poverty rate is probably misleading. That too is true. But any assessment of the war’s political legacy requires a detailed discussion of just how misleading the official poverty rate really is, why its flaws have been allowed to persist for decades, and how their persistence undermined political support for efforts to reduce poverty.

The Census Bureau publishes a table every September showing its estimate of the “official” poverty rate for the previous calendar year, along with the rate in every prior year back to 1959. Figure 1 (see page 84) shows these estimates. They indicate that 19 percent of Americans were poor in 1964. Five years later, in 1969, the official rate had fallen by roughly a third, to 12.1 percent. Had the poverty rate continued to fall by a third every five years, it would have been 5 percent in 1979 and 2 percent in 1989. Had that happened, Johnson’s claim to a place in history would have gotten a big boost.

According to Figure 1, however, there was no clear trend in poverty after 1969, either up or down. The official rate rose in the wake of recessions, reaching 15 percent in 1983, 1993, and 2010–2012, and it fell during recoveries, dropping to 11 or 12 percent in 1973, 1979, 2000, and 2006. If you believe Figure 1, therefore, the War on Poverty got off to a promising start between 1964 and 1969 but then turned into a stalemate.

Before accepting that conclusion, however, you need to ask where the numbers in Figure 1 come from and whether you should believe them. The Census Bureau derives the numbers from a large household survey called the Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC), which tries to interview the “householder” in a representative sample of residences. The “house-



holder” must be one of the people who owns or rents the residence. If a married couple owns or rents the residence, either partner can be the householder. The Census Bureau also asks who else lives in the household, and whether they are related to the householder by birth, marriage, or adoption. Everyone related to the householder is considered part of the same “family.” Those who live alone or with nonrelatives are considered “unrelated individuals.”

The survey also includes detailed questions about how much money each household member received during the previous calendar year from different sources, such as self-employment, wages, or unemployment benefits. “Family income” is the total pre-tax money income of everyone in the householder’s family. To decide who is poor, the Census Bureau compares each family’s total income to a poverty threshold that depends on the size of the family and the ages of its members. If a family’s total income is below its poverty threshold, the bureau counts all its members as

poor. Taken together, these thresholds are known as the poverty line.

The Census Bureau raises the poverty line every year by the same percentage as the increase in the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers (CPI-U). The CPI-U does not try to measure changes in what people need, or why they think they need it. Nor does it measure changes in what Americans mean when they talk about poverty. The CPI-U just measures changes in prices. But if we want to know how close America has come to eliminating the kind of poverty that existed in 1964, the official measure is supposed to provide an answer. However, the world has also changed in other ways that the official poverty count either ignores or mismeasures. As a result, Figure 1 does not actually tell us much about changes in the kind of poverty that Lyndon Johnson promised to eliminate. Four changes are especially important when we try to measure changes in the poverty rate since 1964.

**Cohabiting couples.** Imagine two twenty-five-year-olds who are romanti-

cally involved, live together, and each earned \$12,000 in 2013. If they were unmarried, the Census Bureau would have classified them as unrelated individuals, with poverty thresholds of \$12,119 each. Since their incomes were only \$12,000, the bureau would have counted them both as poor. They would each have needed at least \$12,199, bringing their total household income to at least \$24,398, for the bureau to stop counting either of them as poor.

Had they been married, however, the bureau would have taken a more upbeat view of their economic situation, classifying them as a family of two with a poverty threshold of \$15,600. As a result of this change they would both have been above their poverty threshold instead of below it. According to the Census Bureau’s most recent data, 11 percent of all opposite-sex couples who lived together in 2012 were unmarried. We don’t have such a figure for 1964, but it was probably only 1 or 2 percent. The assumption that cohabiting couples need more income than

married couples has therefore raised the official poverty rate. This increase in the poverty rate would make sense only if the absence of a marriage license increased a couple’s expenses by 55 percent (from \$15,600 to \$24,238). The Census Bureau has never tried to defend that assumption, presumably because it is a byproduct of rules set by the Office of Management and Budget, which the Census must follow whether it likes them or not.

**Noncash benefits.** Noncash benefits now provide many low-income families with some or all of their food, housing, and medical care. Such programs were either tiny or nonexistent in 1964, and their growth has significantly reduced low-income families’ need for cash. However, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) does not allow the Census Bureau to incorporate the value of these benefits into the recipients’ poverty thresholds. The President’s Council of Economic Advisers estimates that even if we ignore Medicare and Medicaid, food and housing

# GALLERIES AND MUSEUMS

## A CURRENT LISTING



Ill: Kiss, 1968, gouache on rag board. 25 x 25 inches.

features works from the psychedelic period of the late 1960s (of which his *Angel Head* was featured in the *Sinister Pop* exhibition at the Whitney Museum in 2012–13), to Cheng’s gouache shadow pieces, on to his torn abstractions, and eventually to his alchemical works in the 1970s and 1980s. A fully illustrated catalog of the exhibition is available at \$25 (incl. tax, postpaid) and can be viewed on our website, [shepherdgallery.com](http://shepherdgallery.com).

**Shepherd/ W & K Galleries**, 58 East 79th Street, NYC; (212) 861-4050; [www.shepherdgallery.com](http://www.shepherdgallery.com); [shepherdny@aol.com](mailto:shepherdny@aol.com). Tuesday through Saturday, 10am–6pm. Master Drawings. January 23–February 21, 2015. CHING HO CHENG: 1946–1989. THE FIVE ELEMENTS. March 13th through May 16th, 2015. Shepherd Gallery is pleased to present its fourth exhibition of works by Ching ho Cheng. The exhibition features



Frederick Catherwood, Views of Ancient Monuments in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan, first edition, London, 1844. Estimate \$20,000 to \$30,000.

**Swann Auction Galleries**, 104 East 25th Street, NYC; (212) 254-4710; Upcoming Auction: *Maps & Atlases, Natural History & Color Print Books*, December 4. A selection of rare and early works related to the study of botany is featured in this eclectic sale, with more than a half-dozen herbals from the 1600s and earlier; and an exquisite watercolor on vellum from 1763 depicting an exotic plant grown in an English hot house. Also visually appealing is Frederick Catherwood’s *Views of Ancient Monuments in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan*, a color plate book documenting recently discovered archaeological sites throughout Central America. Also included in the sale are important world maps and early maps of the Americas. More info at [SwannGalleries.com](http://SwannGalleries.com).



David Baise, Criss Cross, 21 1/2" x 30" Watercolor.

Our gallery is dedicated to the finest work in landscape, still life, genre, urban and marine art by current traditional American painters, many with national reputations.

**American Painting Fine Art**, 5118 MacArthur Blvd., NW, Washington, D.C. 20016, (202) 244-3244, [classicalamericanpainting.com](http://classicalamericanpainting.com). Wednesday–Saturday, 11am–7pm, and by appointment. Recent Works of NYC subjects by Gallery Artists, Andrei Kushnir, Michele Martin Taylor, Barbara Nuss, Michael Francis, Chad Alan, Carol Spils, Barry Lindley, Sara Linda Poly, Jean Schwartz, and Bill Schmidt. Paintings in oil, acrylic and watercolor, all framed. Also: recent works in watercolor by NYC artist David Baise: *Images of Manhattan*.



not judged by the gender of the maker. For more information visit us at [PenandBrush.org](http://PenandBrush.org).

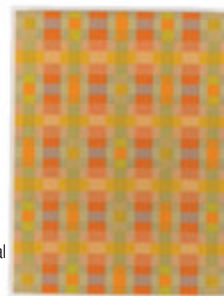
**Pen and Brush.** The neon writing’s on the wall. We can see your work here. So can scholars, collectors, curators, gallerists, agents + publishers. Can you? Until it’s just about the art, the Grrrrly Show must go on. Submit your visual art or literary work now. Pen and Brush is the only non-profit organization dedicated to creating a platform for women in the literary and visual arts by showcasing high-quality, professional work. We believe that art and literature created by women deserves to be recognized and valued on its merit—

**Alexandre Gallery**, 41 East 57th Street (at Madison Avenue), 13th Floor, New York, NY; (212) 755-2828; [inquiries@alexandregallery.com](mailto:inquiries@alexandregallery.com). [www.alexandregallery.com](http://www.alexandregallery.com). Tuesday through Friday, 10am–5:30pm and Saturday 11am–5pm. Brett Bigbee: *Two Paintings*. Lois Dodd: *Small Paintings*. February 26 through April 4. Opening reception: February 26, 5:30pm–7:30pm



Brett Bigbee, Josie Over Time, 2011–15, oil on linen, 13 3/8 x 12 1/8 inches

**The Drawing Room**, 66 Newtown Lane, East Hampton, NY 11937, (631) 324-5016, [www.drawingroom-gallery.com](http://www.drawingroom-gallery.com). Monday, Friday and Saturday 10am–5pm; Sunday 11am–5pm. VINCENT LONGO, paintings. ELAINE GROVE, sculpture. March 14, 2015–April 27, 2015. Concurrent exhibitions feature recent works by two acclaimed artists from Long Island’s East End, VINCENT LONGO, paintings and ELAINE GROVE, sculpture. In his paintings, Vincent Longo explores the energy and symmetry of the grid, creating improvisational yet structured abstractions through painterly latticework, radiant color and a timeless sense of ornamentation. Elaine Grove’s sculptural assemblages emerge from the touchstone of classic constructivism, marrying the found object with an internal logic that is immediate, poetic and rooted in history -- both of the arts and of the artist.



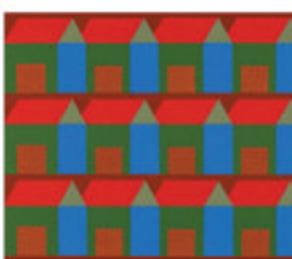
VINCENT LONGO  
Orange: Lozenge, 2000  
acrylic on wood  
24 x 18 inches  
photography by Jenny Gorman



Plane Tourist: An illumination after Albert Bierstadt, Oil stick on paper mounted on burned black wood boxes.

Downtown Artist Community. In 2012, he wrote *The Art Dockuments, Tales of the Drive-by Art Gallery, 1980–1986*, which chronicled the exhibitions in his studio’s loading dock and Downtown LA’s outlaw and bohemian artist community.

**The District Gallery**, 740 E. 3rd St. Los Angeles, CA; (213) 814-7164; [www.districtgallery.com](http://www.districtgallery.com); [artsdistrictla@gmail.com](mailto:artsdistrictla@gmail.com); Wednesday through Sunday, Noon to 6pm; Carlton Davis Jr. Exhibition: *The Past Retooled, The Present Rebooted*; April 30 to June 12, 2015. The drawings, paintings, and objects of Carlton Davis Jr.: artist, architect, and author, are influenced by his teachers, Neil Welliver, Robert Moscovitz, Knox Martin, Walker Evans, and Charles Moore; his employment by designers, Glen Fleck and Saul Bass, Walt Disney Imagineering, and Frank Gehry, and his habitation in the LA



Red Ochre House, 2014, Flashe on Canvas, 30" x 36"

**A.I.R. Gallery**, 111 Front Street, Brooklyn, NY 11201. (212) 255-6651, [info@airgallery.com](mailto:info@airgallery.com) or [www.airgallery.org](http://www.airgallery.org). Wednesday–Sunday 12pm–6pm. Ann Schaumburger: *One, Six, Twelve, Twenty*. Opening reception Thursday, April 2, 2015.



BASCOVE, Bronx Whitestone Bridge, 1998, oil on canvas, 30" x 48"

by painter and printmaker A. Bascove. “To the City’s Bridges, Billets-Doux” *The New York Times* “High-colored descriptions of complex geometric structures... like Joseph Stella on an acid trip” *Art in America*. Catalogue available. On view thru July 12.

**Snug Harbor Cultural Center, Noble Maritime Collection.** 1000 Richmond Terrace, Staten Island, NY, (718) 447-6490. [noblemaritime.org](http://noblemaritime.org). Thursday through Sunday, 1pm–5 pm, BASCOVE/BRIDGES: Transporting the Metropolis. Over 30 paintings and works on paper celebrating the Bridges of New York City, from 1995 to the present, by painter and printmaker A. Bascove. “To the City’s Bridges, Billets-Doux” *The New York Times* “High-colored descriptions of complex geometric structures... like Joseph Stella on an acid trip” *Art in America*. Catalogue available. On view thru July 12.



benefits lowered the poverty rate by 3.0 percentage points in 2012.

Medical care is by far the most expensive of today's noncash benefits, and Medicaid and veterans' benefits now pay for most of the big medical bills that poor families incur. However, incorporating these programs' value into poverty calculations is more difficult than incorporating food and housing subsidies. Most of what Medicaid spends on the poor is for "big ticket" items, like nursing homes, heart surgery, and cancer treatments, that poor families have never been able to pay for out of their own income.

Before Medicaid was created, the poor sometimes got such care from state and municipal programs or from doctors and private hospitals that offered "uncompensated" care. Medicaid coverage has undoubtedly made such care available to many poor families that previously went without it, saving some lives and improving many others. But it has not had the same effect as food stamps or rent subsidies on poor families' nonmedical standard of living. When a poor family gets food stamps or a rent subsidy, it spends less of its cash on food and shelter and has more to spend on the phone bill, fixing the family car, or taking a child to McDonald's for her birthday. Medicaid frees up far less money for such uses than food stamps or a rent subsidy, because poor families without Medicaid cannot afford to set aside enough money for major medical emergencies. They know that if they need expensive care they will somehow have to get it free or else do without.

Of course, Medicaid also pays some relatively small medical bills that poor families without Medicaid pay out of their own pockets. The best estimates I have seen suggest that in 2010 Medicaid reduced the average poor family's out-of-pocket medical spending by about \$500. That does not mean, however, that the introduction of Medicaid in 1965 reduced recipients' medical bills by the 1965 equivalent of \$500, leaving them with more money for everything else. The patchwork of subsidies and free care that existed before 1965 meant that even then poor patients often paid less than the market price for the care they received. I have not been able to find any evidence on how large those savings were. But if the introduction of Medicaid improved poor families' access to health care without reducing their out-of-pocket medical spending, we should not think of it as having raised their overall standard of living in the same way that the introduction of food stamps or rent subsidies has.

**Refundable tax credits.** As part of its effort to reform welfare by "making work pay," the Clinton administration persuaded Congress to expand the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) between 1993 and 1996. By 2013 the EITC provided a refundable tax credit of \$3,250 a year for workers with two or more children and earnings between \$10,000 and \$23,000. Because the official poverty count is based on pre-tax rather than post-tax income, these tax "refunds" are not counted as income, even though the working poor often view the checks as the highpoint of their year—the one time when they can afford to live like other Americans. According to the Council of Economic

Advisers, treating refundable tax credits like other income would have reduced the poverty rate by another 3.0 percentage points in 2012.

**Price changes.** Using the Consumer Price Index to adjust the poverty thresholds for inflation pushed up the threshold for a married couple with two children from \$3,142 to \$23,624 between 1964 and 2013. All the other thresholds rose by the same multiplier (about 7.5). Whether \$23,624 bought the same standard of living in 2013 that \$3,142 bought in 1964 is an almost unanswerable question. If no new goods or services had been introduced since 1964,

The most widely used alternative to the CPI-U is the chain-price index for Personal Consumption Expenditure (which I will call the "PCE index"). The Commerce Department's Bureau of Economic Analysis constructs this measure to calculate changes in the total value of all the consumer goods and services produced in the United States each year. The PCE index is therefore the largest single influence on government estimates of economic growth. If the poverty thresholds had risen in tandem with the PCE index rather than the CPI-U since 1964, the 2013 poverty line would have been 20

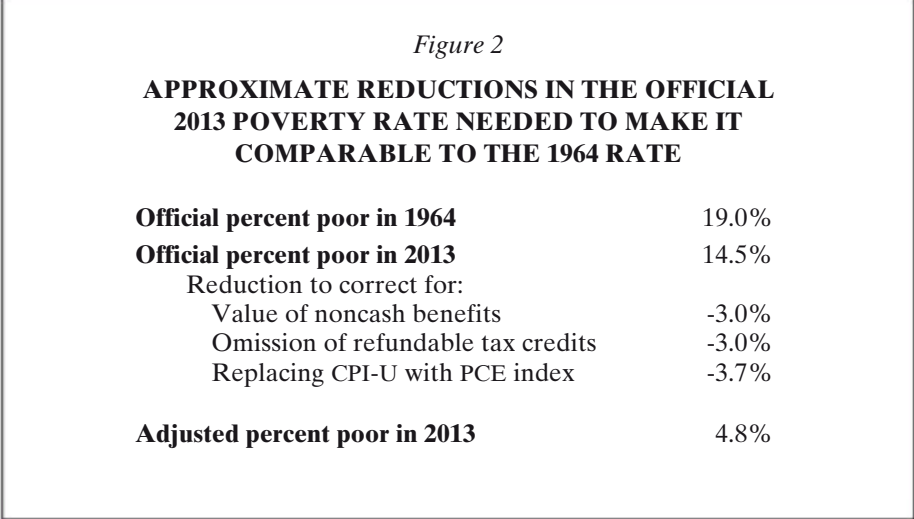
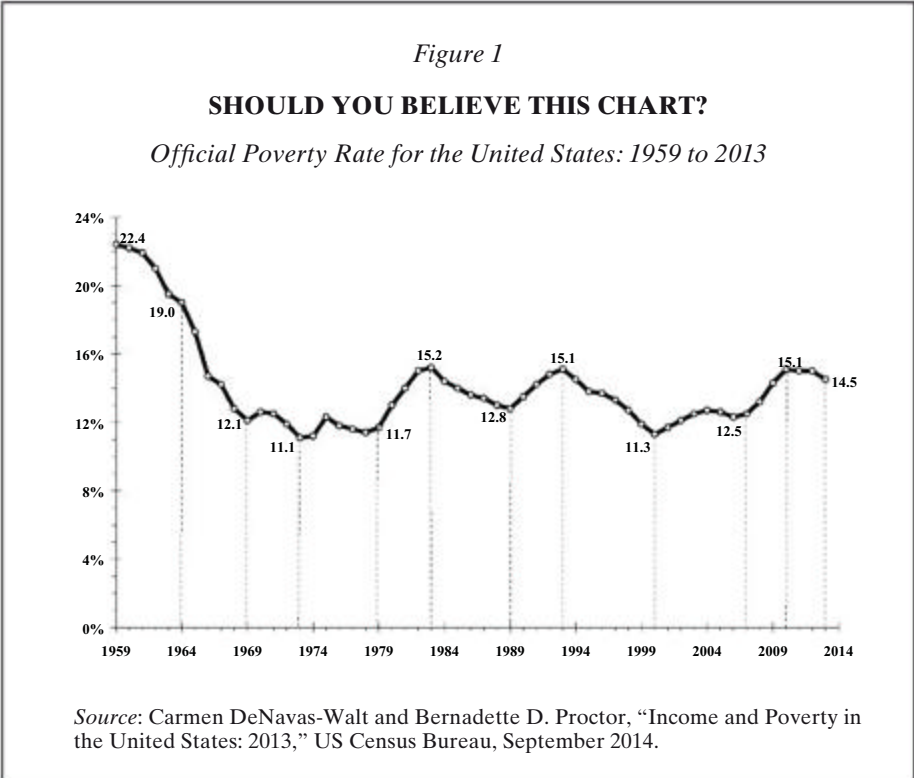
to what Lyndon Johnson had promised in 1964 than to what Ronald Reagan had claimed in 1988.

Fixing these flaws in the official poverty rate helps reconcile trends in poverty with trends in more direct measures of material well-being. Today's poor live in less crowded housing, are more likely to have a complete bathroom and air conditioner in their residence, have bigger TV screens, are more likely to have a telephone, and more likely to have a cell phone. Nonetheless, most of the poor are still beset by constant financial anxiety. In part, that is because the poverty line was set so low in 1964. Linking the poverty line to the Consumer Price Index let it rise a little every year, but not much. Using a more realistic price index keeps the poverty line closer to its real 1964 level, ensuring that those we count as poor are more like those we counted as poor fifty years ago, but in both periods those just above the poverty line have suffered from many of the same problems.

Another reason the poor so often feel beleaguered, anxious, and depressed may be that what is often called "relative poverty" has not changed. Over time, any society's definition of poverty adjusts up or down depending on how much income those in the middle of the distribution have. There is quite a bit of evidence that Americans need an income at least half that of families near the middle of the distribution in order to buy the things they need to hold up their heads in public. In such a world, the only way to reduce the number of people who feel and act poor will be to reduce the number with incomes less than half the 50th percentile (the median). If we adjust for noncash benefits, taxes, and changes in family size, incomes at the 10th percentile were 39 to 40 percent of incomes at the 50th percentile in both 1967 and 2012. It follows that a bit over 10 percent of American families had incomes less than half the median in both years. Using a relative measure not much had changed, even though the absolute poverty rate that Lyndon Johnson promised to reduce has fallen dramatically.

Both liberals and conservatives tend to resist the idea that poverty has fallen dramatically since 1964, although for different reasons. Conservatives' resistance is easy to understand. They have argued since the 1960s that the federal government's antipoverty programs were ineffective, counterproductive, or both. Since the 1970s they have cited the stability of the post-1969 poverty rate to support those judgments. To them, the suggestion that poverty has fallen sounds like a suggestion that the War on Poverty succeeded.

Liberals hear the claim that poverty has fallen quite differently, although they do not like it any better than conservatives do. Anyone, liberal or conservative, who wants the government to solve a problem soon discovers that it is easier to rally support for such an agenda by saying that the problem in question is getting worse than by saying that although the problem is diminishing, more still needs to be done. The equation of "bad" with "worse" is so tight in American political discourse that when I tell my friends or my students that "there is still a lot of poverty, but less than there used to be," they have trouble remembering both halves of the sentence. Some remember that there is still a lot of



if the quality of existing goods and services had not changed, if poor people still wanted the same mix of goods and services as in 1964, and if the prices of all goods and services had risen by a factor of 7.5, almost everyone would agree that multiplying the 1964 poverty thresholds by 7.5 was the right way to correct for inflation. Reality, however, does not meet any of these requirements. Many things that were for sale in 2013 did not exist in 1964, the quality of goods and services available in both years changed at different rates, and prices of identical goods and services also changed at different rates. As a result, even economists cannot agree on how much the value of a dollar has changed.

That said, there is a fairly broad consensus among economists that the CPI-U has overstated the cost of maintaining a constant standard of living over the past fifty years, although they disagree about the size of the bias.

percent lower than it was, and the 2013 poverty rate would have been about 3.7 percentage points lower than it was.

Figure 2 provides a first approximation of how correcting the 2013 poverty rate for noncash food and housing benefits, refundable tax credits, and upward bias in the CPI-U would change the 2013 poverty rate. With these corrections the official poverty rate falls from 14.5 to 4.8 percent, making the 2013 rate roughly a quarter of the 1964 rate (19.0 percent). If we were to lower the poverty threshold for cohabiting couples to match that for married couples the 2013 poverty rate would have fallen even more.

The estimates in Figure 2 are not exact. More important, their combined effect may be smaller than the sum of their separate effects, making the drop in the "true" poverty rate smaller than Figure 2 suggests. But even if the true poverty rate was 6 or 7 percent in 2013, it would have fallen by about two thirds since 1964, putting it considerably closer



poverty. Others remember that there is less than there used to be. Few remember both.

Although I have argued that the absolute poverty rate has declined dramatically since President Johnson launched his War on Poverty in 1964,

it does not follow that the programs he launched between 1964 and 1968 caused the decline. I argued that food stamps, rent subsidies, and refundable tax credits all had a role in the decline, but food stamps did not become a national program until the end of the

Nixon administration, the fraction of poor families receiving rent subsidies grew quite slowly, and refundable tax credits remained tiny until 1993. The growth of these programs was nonetheless inspired partly by Johnson's earlier success in convincing much

of the Democratic Party that poverty reduction was a political and moral challenge they could no longer ignore. The successes and failures of specific anti-poverty programs will be the subject of a second article, which will appear in the next issue. □

# Let's Not Allow Berlusconi's Mondadori to Devour the Entire Rizzoli-Corriere Group

Umberto Eco

In Italy on February 21, about fifty authors who work with Bompiani (and other publishing houses) publicly protested Mondadori's proposed acquisition of the RCS Group. Let's try to see clearly here. Mondadori is certainly the largest Italian publishing group (it includes, for example, such prestigious houses as Einaudi) and it belongs to the Berlusconi family. RCS, that is, Rizzoli-Corriere della Sera, is the second-largest Italian group and it includes a major daily, various other publications, and most important a series of book publishers such as Bompiani, Adelphi, Fabbri, Rizzoli, Archinto, BUR, Lizard, Marsilio, and Sonzogno.

This is the assortment of publishing houses that the RCS board, faced with steep debt, wants to sell to Mondadori. At first there was talk of a new group, assembled through a merger of the Mondadori book group with its RCS counterpart, but at this point things are moving down a different path: what's now being discussed is the acquisition of RCS by Mondadori.

Now let's try to forget for a minute that Mondadori belongs to the Berlusconi family—which certainly adds an unsettling touch to the whole affair, because the Berlusconi family would thus come to dominate not only the television industry but the publishing sector, too. The problem would remain the same even if the owner of Monda-



dori was just some ordinary Mr. Smith. Whether Smith or Berlusconi, Mondadori plus RCS would form a publishing colossus dominating 40 percent of the Italian market (there is no equivalent in the European landscape). Why are the writers who signed the appeal I mentioned above so worried?

There's no mistaking the power that this concentration would wield in Italy. Since it would be competing against two mid-sized groups and a plethora of small publishing houses (that are occasionally indispensable in discovering new authors), this new colossus would acquire an unsettling bargaining

power over authors. It could tell them "either work with us, on the terms that we offer, or go fall into the hands of a smaller publisher." But a group with a 40 percent market share would also have decisive influence over bookstores and would be capable of punishing smaller publishers. So the author who chooses not to give in to the group's offer will see reduced opportunities in terms of distribution.

Moreover it has been noted that the merger would turn literary awards into a farce. The most important Italian literary prize—the Strega—does have a jury of hundreds of voters but, noble-sounding pieties aside, everyone knows that publishing houses control substantial "bundles" of votes. A monster group like the one being proposed could dictate every year which author gets the Strega. At that point we might as well get rid of literary prizes entirely, as they would have the credibility, to all but the most naive readers, of hair rejuvenation commercials.

We have to admit that the Mondadori group, even though it belongs to Berlusconi, has shown itself to be pretty liberal toward the publishing houses it controls, allowing Einaudi, for example, to pursue its own literary vocation. But even if Berlusconi were the most virtuous of tycoons, nothing could keep him from someday selling out to another less virtuous owner (if that idea doesn't sound improbable), and the monster group could develop

a strong inclination for censorship. Concerning the free market, it is true that industry concentrations are often economically inevitable, but the system remains healthy when there is still competition between rival concentrations. If, however, one group is more powerful than all the others, there is a crisis in free competition. And again, in free market terms, reducing competition always threatens to undermine quality.

In short, the authors (who as a group constitute the hens that lay the golden eggs of the publishing world) are not happy with this looming threat. Of course, the right-wing press immediately began talking about a "Communist" plot and an attempt to drive RCS into bankruptcy. It's true that the merger with Mondadori looks right now like the easiest one to implement, but there is no reason a consortium of entrepreneurs, possibly foreign ones, couldn't be put together, big enough to purchase the RCS intellectual treasure chest and thus creating an independent group.

The future is in the lap of Allah, or God, or the Higgs boson, but there is no doubt that the authors who signed this appeal (including such non-Italians as Tahar Ben Jelloun, Hanif Kureishi, and Thomas Piketty, as well as a great American editor, Drenka Willen) are uneasy, and they ask their readers to feel uneasy with them. □

—Translated from the Italian by  
Antony Shugaar

## LETTERS

### GOOD FAITH & THE SCHOOLS

To the Editors:

Jonathan Zimmerman reviews my book about school reform in New York City under Michael Bloomberg, *Lessons of Hope* [NYR, March 5], and finds that we inherited a "profoundly ineffective" system and got "results": by "almost every way we can measure, the overall quality of New York's schools improved." What's not to like? For Zimmerman, it's that we alienated core constituencies in the process.

Unfortunately, that's the heart of the problem. You can't do major reform without upsetting these interests. The teachers union, bureaucrats, and local politicians who controlled the prior system—and ran it to their advantage—inevitably push back hard. Power doesn't give up prerogative cheerfully.

Zimmerman appears most concerned that I "alienate[d] a substantial fraction of [the teachers]." Here, I partially agree, admitting in the book, "We should have found better ways to connect with teachers." But

that isn't as easy as Zimmerman suggests. Their union blocked us from communicating directly with teachers, choosing instead to present its own sustained, venomous PR attack on us. Equally challenging, several essential changes upset teachers: closing schools means looking for new jobs, while eliminating automatic placements based on seniority makes it harder to find them. Most troubling, our efforts to hold teachers accountable threatened job security and lifetime pensions.

Zimmerman faults me for suggesting why Diane Ravitch, once a strong supporter of Bloomberg and his policies, may have switched her positions and became our fiercest critic. Zimmerman doesn't present the full picture. Early on, Ravitch pushed me to hire her partner to run a training program. When I didn't, she wrote a bitter e-mail concluding, "I despair for your initiatives." Soon thereafter, Ravitch described herself as our "most caustic critic." What caused such sudden vitriol? Zimmerman doesn't say. Ravitch's attacks continued unabated, even as we adopted policies that she had espoused. Yet in all her writings, she never mentioned the hiring decision.

Zimmerman accepts Ravitch's explana-

tion that "my views changed as I saw how these ideas were working out in reality." But Zimmerman ignores his own recognition that these ideas—especially charter and small schools—were working well in New York City. And many of Ravitch's reversals are not so easy to explain on the basis of how "ideas were working out." She had repeatedly said things like urban school districts "are jobs programs for adults at the expense of the children"; that charter schools "are public schools"; and that, in schools enrolling "high proportions of poor students, performance is appallingly low." On these, and many other views, Ravitch reversed herself without explanation.

I join Zimmerman in hoping we can find less contentious ways to reform our schools—but not if doing so comes at the expense of our kids.

**Joel Klein**  
CEO, Amplify  
New York City

**Jonathan Zimmerman replies:**

I have a great deal of admiration for what Joel Klein accomplished as New York City

schools chancellor. But we disagree—deeply and fundamentally—in our estimation of the people who do not share that admiration.

Klein casts these objectors as self-serving cynics. He is an advocate for "our kids"; they are advocates only for themselves. And here he includes Diane Ravitch, insisting that her opposition to him stemmed not from her honest evaluation of his reforms but rather from his refusal to hire her partner. According to Klein, my own review showed that his reforms were "working well." Clearly, then, Ravitch must have had some ulterior motive for her change of heart.

But my review did not say that all of Klein's reforms were working well. I explicitly noted that some of them had succeeded, as best we can tell, while others—including his teacher accountability systems—had not. Most of all, I emphasized that people of equal virtue and knowledge can interpret these reforms in different ways. But Klein's black-and-white view of the world won't allow any such gray. Instead of addressing the substance of Ravitch's critiques, which she has detailed in two long books, he simply quotes her older statements in support of his opinions. Then he repeats the charge that she reversed her views "without



explanation,” which is simply false. Klein has every right to challenge Ravitch’s revised ideas, but he should do so on their merits and evidence instead of assuming—prima facie—that they have neither.

My review criticized Klein not for his own good-faith works on behalf of our schools, but for his refusal to believe that his foes were also working in good faith. Nothing in his reply suggests that I was wrong.

## REALITY VS. ‘THE IMITATION GAME’

To the Editors:

I was delighted to read Christian Caryl’s article “Saving Alan Turing from His Friends” [NYR, February 5]. My parents were both at Bletchley Park. I believe it’s important that the achievements of all who worked there are widely understood. Many authors, as well as the Bletchley Park Trust, have worked hard to this end. The story—of Turing himself, and of the codebreakers as a whole—is strong enough without making it up. As explained so well by Caryl, almost all the points of drama in *The Imitation Game* were fabricated, and the entire thesis was a gross distortion. The film did a disservice to Turing himself and to all the other nine thousand people who worked at Bletchley Park.

Alexander Nicoll  
London, England

## JOE ALSOP’S ADDRESS

To the Editors:

I was pleased, for the most part, with Robert Kaiser’s review of my book *The Georgetown Set* [NYR, March 5]. However, this “rather dry historian” would like to correct a minor error in Kaiser’s piece. Whereas Joe Alsop’s old house has never moved from 2720 Dumbarton Street in Georgetown, it was also known as Dumbarton Avenue back in Alsop’s day, and was so indicated on Joe’s personal stationery. A few years back, the Georgetown Metropolitan’s website sponsored a discussion on the question: “Is it Dumbarton St. or Avenue?”

Gregg Herken  
Santa Cruz, California

## CORRECTIONS

In Brenda Wineapple’s “The Brilliance of Sybille Bedford” [NYR, March 5], Bedford’s mother was born in Hamburg, not England, and the schloss in which she lived with her father was located in the German town of Feldkirch.

In the photograph on page 27 of Jennifer Homans’s article “In Balanchine’s Beautiful Forest” [NYR, March 5], which contained incorrect caption information owing to an error at Getty Images, the ballerina dancing in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is Kay Mazzo and the date is unknown.

In the photograph on page 22 of Frank Rich’s review of Richard Zoglin’s *Hope: Entertainer of the Century* [NYR, March 19], Bob Hope is performing with Jennifer Hosten, Miss World 1970.

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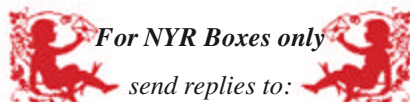
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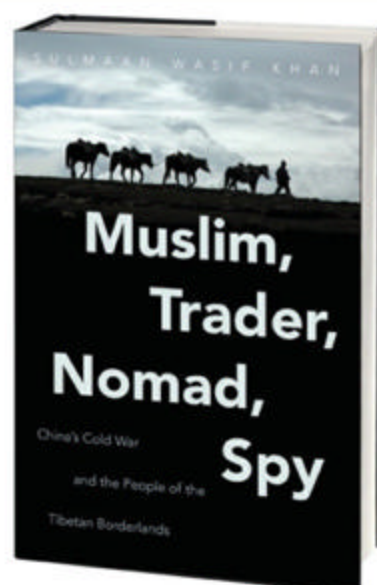
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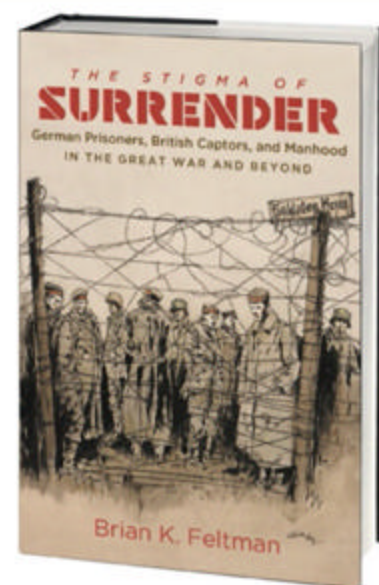
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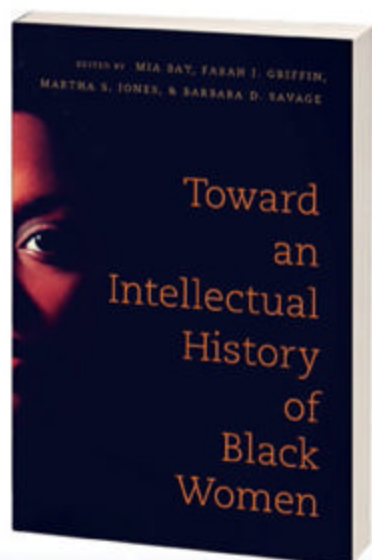
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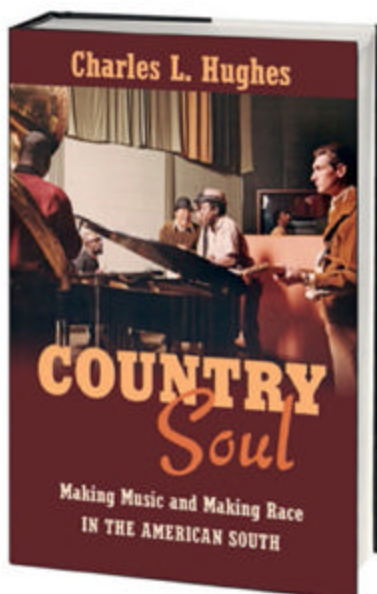
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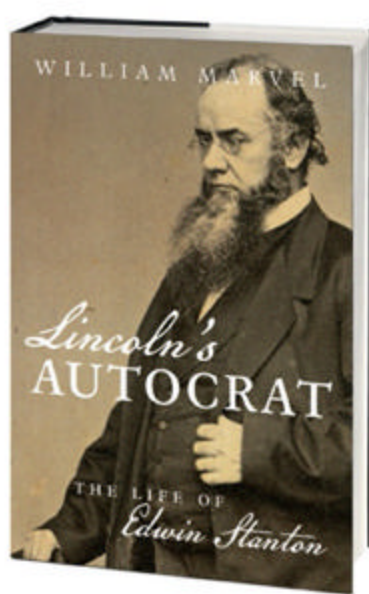
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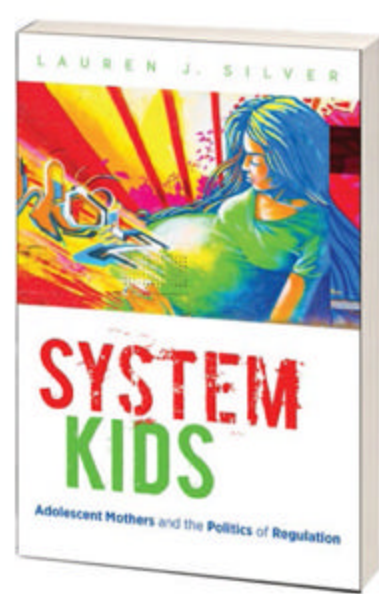
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